

Vanessa 00:13 I'm Vanessa Zoltan and this is Hot And Bothered, and today we are bringing you a new segment called-- Julia, what is the segment called?

Julia 00:20 "Stop Imagining Having Good Sex".

00:22 [MUSIC]

Vanessa 00:27 And Julia, our listeners might notice that your voice sounds a little bit different. Would you like to explain to them why?

Julia 00:35 15 years ago, I got hit in the face with a field hockey ball while wearing a mouth guard. And then, four weeks ago, my tooth decided to get infected and have to be pulled.

Vanessa 00:44 You are the cutest person that I know without a front tooth.

Julia 00:47 Thank you.

Vanessa 00:48 You're welcome. Okay, so today's Reddit question.

Julia 00:51 Okay, so this question is from a user who called themselves "Romance Books Ruined Me".

00:57 [MUSIC STING]

Julia 00:59 "I, 23-year-old woman, think romance novels ruined my expectations of love, and I'm second guessing my relationship with my boyfriend, 23-year-old man, of one-and-a-half years. How do I know if he's who I want to spend my life with, and if I'm just scared of commitment?

Vanessa 01:14 I love my boyfriend. I really do. But he's ready to get engaged and get married, but I'm feeling terrified of making a wrong decision. We've talked about it and planned for the future, but now that we've looked at rings, I am freaking out a bit. I've read romance novels for years from age 11 until now, and keep doubting my feelings because real life doesn't match the books. Realistically, I know that life isn't like a romance book, but I can't help but question what we have because of it.

Julia 01:42 The other part of this is that I think I've realized I have some issues with commitment. I have a hard time committing to a decision to make a big purchase, nevermind committing to forever with someone. So my question for you, Reddit-- Insert Julia and Vanessa-- is: How do I know? How do I know that this is what I want, even though it's not a romance novel relationship? I just need to be talked down and given some unbiased advice. Please help. We are unbiased.

Vanessa 02:08 Yes.

**[MUSIC BREAK]**

Vanessa 02:20 So the name of the segment is "Stop Imagining Good Sex."

Julia 02:24 I don't know what romance novel expectations that she's not getting fulfilled in her relationship. So I projected that she's not having good sex, and in romance novels there's good sex. And so she just needs to stop imagining that, and then her problems will be solved.

Vanessa 02:39 Oh my God, I have such a different opinion, and this is going to offend you because you're a 23-year-old woman. I don't think anybody should get married before the age of 26.

Julia 02:48 That doesn't offend me.

Vanessa 02:35 Okay. So I'm like, you should wait. You're not ready to get married. You guys have only been together a year and a half and your child.

Julia 02:55 Yeah, no. I, I actually think that as well.

Vanessa 02:58 There are certain cultures in which there is an absolute reason to get married young, right? If you are a part of like a very religious group, in which it's, like, very important to have a really big family and you know exactly what the cultural norms of your family are going to look like, I think that it tends to make sense to get married young. I think that there are very few reasons why people should be getting married at 23. I just like, don't understand why a 23 year old is feeling pressured to get married. Maybe Romance novels are the problem, but like maybe she's just not ready to get married. I'm 37 and I'm like barely ready.

Julia 03:31 Ah, yeah. I don't think people should get married unless they know they want to get married. So that seems like the easiest answer to this.

Vanessa 03:38 Right. Like regardless, this guy might be right for you, but like timing is wrong. And if he's not willing to wait for you, then he's not the guy for you. And like, that's fine. You're a wee babe. Here's the thing that I think is really hard about being young, and I say this to somebody who like knows that I'm still young and still like falls into this trap. The stakes feel high because you haven't had enough time on this earth to make huge mistakes or have huge things go badly and then see, oh, but five years later things are totally fine. Right? When you're 23, like, five years ago was high school. It was a totally different time. Whereas when you're like 37, like, my whole life fell apart when I was 30, and now I like, have a whole other life. So I get to tell myself this story that people come back from catastrophes, and I feel like what she's

saying is, "It's a catastrophe if I don't marry this man. This man who I love, who's like offering me everything I'm supposed to want, but I don't want it." It's not a catastrophe. Say No.

Julia 04:40 Yes, I agree.

Vanessa 04:41 The name of the segment is "Just Say No".

Julia 04:43 [Laughs] "Just say no to marriage".

Vanessa 04:45 Yeah. The other "just say no question" is, like, do we think we should be just saying no to like romance novels and Romcoms more? Do we think that these are ruining our lives?

Julia 04:55 I think the interesting part of this question for me, which I had brought up in the beginning, is what she is seeing in these stories that she's not experiencing herself. But I was wondering here if what she was seeing in romance that was leading her to doubt her relationship was this idea that when you meet someone who you're going to spend the rest of your life with, that you suddenly become sure that that is true. And I think that that is what's troubling her, is that she doesn't feel sure and therefore, doesn't feel like this is a romance that will last. So I worry that this Reddit questioner, if it's "I'm not having good sex and there's good sex and romance novels," that's something to examine more. But if it's "I'm not sure I want to be with this person forever." I don't think that means that their relationship is doomed to fail.

Vanessa 05:47 Absolutely. I think it might just be they should be together for five and a half years before they get married. And also, the other thing that tends to happen in romance novels because they are fantasies, is that all of the negative things in your life change. He comes into your life and also you, some money comes into your life. Right? Like, we just have to think about Jane Eyre. She gets money, independence to live near a family. She was an orphan. She gets cousins. Like, she gets everything. And so there's this feeling that like the man comes in and you literally, your whole life clicks into place. And like, that's certainly not the way that the world works.

Julia 06:28 I definitely don't want us to be walking away from the segment being like, telling ourselves stories about good men who come in and our whole lives get better, is bad for us. 'Cause I don't think that's true. But also, I'm just like wondering, like, the power of like telling ourselves stories and retelling the same stories. And like, the ways that they work on us in ways that we can't anticipate. How much we should be like curating the stories that we read in order to make sure we're like getting the right messages for ourselves, and you know? So is it just a cop out to say that you'll know that romance novels are hurting you if they're causing you more distress than they are causing you comfort?

Vanessa 07:11 So here's the thing. I don't want people to spend their whole lives pining for a fantasy, and nor do I want people settling-- Right?-- too quickly. I think that settling

is a very complicated concept, and I don't know what role romance novels have in like complicating that problem of like, giving us these hopes of what a man can be. I think it's important to expect a lot from men, but I also don't think that men come in and, like, rescue us.

Julia 07:42 Yeah, and especially don't rescue us. And also, suddenly our financial problems are solved and--

Vanessa 07:49 We've never had better orgasms.

Julia 07:51 And, you get saved from being kidnapped.

Vanessa 07:55 Your tooth suddenly grows back--

Julia 07:56 Grows back in. The tooth fairy comes and leaves me \$1,200 for my dental fees.

Vanessa 08:02 Instead of a bill.

Julia 08:03 Yeah. Right.

Vanessa 08:05 Okay. So the question is, like, what? What stories do we re-tell ourselves and why? And what role does telling ourselves these stories again and again play in our lives? Is it good or bad?

Julia 08:14 Yeah. How do we know if they're harming us, and how do we know if they're giving us something to strive for?

Vanessa 08:21 We should ask someone smarter.

Julia 08:25 Yes, I agree.

08:27 [MUSIC]

Margaret 08:40 My name is Margaret H. Willison, and I am one-half of the Too Bossy Dames culture newsletter, one-third of the Appointment Television podcast, a semi-regular fourth chair on Pop Culture Happy Hour, and today we'll go with, a putative winner of the imaginary reality TV show, America's Next Top Best Friend.

Vanessa 09:03 Woo, congratulations.

Margaret 09:05 Thank you. I just think it's one I would really excel at.

Vanessa 09:08 Yeah, because you're there to make friends.

Margaret 09:11 Yeah. I had a t-shirt that said that for a long time. [laughs]

Vanessa 09:15 It's a good bet.

Margaret 09:15 Yeah, thank you. Thank you.

Vanessa 09:17 And you are also a romance reader.

Margaret 09:19 A huge romance reader. I am a passionate advocate for romance readership.

Vanessa 09:25 Yes. Okay. And so, with all of your qualifications as a cultural critic, somebody who thinks about the way that culture impacts our lives, and as a voracious reader of romance novels, we have asked you here today to respond to a Reddit question that somebody posted on Reddit and did not ask for our input on, but we are giving it to them anyway.

Margaret 09:48 Well, I mean, they posted it on Reddit. They asked for everyone's input.

Vanessa 09:51 There you go. So I'm going to read you this reddit question.

Margaret 09:54 So excited.

Vanessa 09:55 I love my boyfriend. I really do. He's ready to get engaged and get married, but I'm terrified of making a wrong decision.

10:00 [MUSIC]

Vanessa 10:04 How do I know? How do I know that this is what I want, even though it's not a romance novel relationship? I just need to be talked down and given some unbiased advice.

Margaret 10:14 There is no such thing as reading too many romance novels. We live in a society that tells women at every turn, "What you want is wrong. What you want is too much. What your job is, is not to have wants and needs yourself that you should expect to have met, but to anticipate the wants and needs of people around you, meet them, and minimize the requirements you have of anyone else." That's the problem. That romance novels give you a space where instead you're encouraged to think about what your wants could be and encouraged to live in a space where your wants and needs are some of the most important parts of the storytelling fabric. Like, that's not a problem that's necessary. That's a necessary corrective.

Vanessa 11:08 So given all of that, because I completely agree with everything that you just said, what would your advice be to this young woman?

Margaret 11:14 My advice to this young woman would be, a marriage is a huge commitment, and it's also not a requirement. Uh, if you don't feel confident that this partnership is going to make your life better forever, pause. You don't have to make that commitment yet. You're 23, so you should really only be doing it if you're, like, jazzed. If you just think, this is the person I'd like to spend 70% of my time with for the rest of my life, that's a great partner and you should go for it. And no, that's not going to look like romance novels all of the time. You know, your sex lives are gonna vary over the course of a long relationship. How enthusiastic you are about each other's company is going to vary over it, but it should just be someone where you think every day, my life is going to be better because this person is in it. And if it's anything less than that, why?

Vanessa 12:15 So you have established romance novels' power for good. Power for women to be imagining exactly what you're talking about, right?

Margaret 12:22 Well, where, where romance is a constant benefit in romantic relationships with men or with women, with whomever you've picked with, you know, even the sex demon you've discovered, it's, it's making your life better, it's improving your life, it's enriching your life all the time. And if it's not doing that, it's wrong for you.

Vanessa 12:43 But there are also like brilliant people who say that there are real benefits to compromising, and to quote unquote "settling" in our relationships, right? Because marriage makes us more financially stable and makes us live longer. So do you think that it is possible, what this young woman is entertaining, that reading too many romance novels is setting standards too high, and therefore makes it unrealistic? Like, no man can be Jamie Frasier. Although Diana Gabaldon, I know you don't consider your books romance.

Margaret 13:10 I think the place where I could find some issues with this isn't necessarily, these fantasies are too good and isn't it dangerous to expect men to be that good all of the time? I think the place where you can bump into some problems is, what happens when the fantasies you're reading over and over and over again are actually kind of fucked? What happens when the fantasy you're reading over and over again is: "wealthy man with power accidentally impregnates person in his employ with no power and no financial ability, and then they together make it work into a successful relationship." If all you're reading is *The Millionaire's Surprise Baby*, that's not the direction that I think relationships in our society should be growing in. Um, so there, you can kind of trip me up on this. But at the same time, I just think that it's such a paternalistic attitude to assume that women are incapable of distinguishing between fictional happy endings and real life relationships, and that it's based in wanting to keep women's expectations as small as possible so they can be ignored as comfortably as possible for the people who'd like to take advantage of them.

Vanessa 14:31 I agree with every single thing that you're saying. One thing that frustrates me sometimes that my friends will say, is "I broke up with him because he would never just surprise me with dinner. Like, I would have to ask him to make dinner for me." And I'm just like, well, he's not a mind reader. Like, that is something that's like men in romance novels or in romcoms do. Like, "oh, I created"-- Right? Like, that, Logan does that for Rory in Gilmore Girls, where he's like, "I surprised you from London and made us this beautiful picnic on the roof." And, and like, if that's something you want, I believe that you have to tell men what you want, and then you can judge them if they are unwilling to meet your expectations and give you what you want. So I'm wondering what you think about that? When-- I just get frustrated with my friends when they'll break up with a guy, because it feels like to me, they're just expecting him to read their minds.

Margaret 15:23 I feel like there are good messages you can take away from romance novels and bad messages you can take away. Not just from romance novels, but from romance culture in America. And it's basically like, are you taking it as a reason to investigate your wants and practice communicating about them? Or are you taking it as a fantasy where "my wants should be apparent to anyone who truly cares about me, and I should, if I have to articulate them? Something in the system is broken." But at the same time, I think you're wrong to be so frustrated with your friends, and you're wrong to assume that they're just quitting because they're not dating mind readers. Because there is a way that women are trained to read minds, and uh, men are trained to be obtuse. And you can sense a difference between a receptive emptiness and, uh, entitled obtuseness. And if that's what they're cottoning on to with their partners, they maybe are getting messages before they've even thought to articulate their needs, that their needs aren't of interest to their partners. But I do think there is an element of, um, passivity that can be coming into our romantic narratives that, like, I'd love to see interrogated more. I think a space where female fantasy is understood as the ultimate goal. Like, I think that that's sacrosanct and it has to exist. Because if you don't have the right to play pretend, how will you ever know what you want in the real world? One of the big ways that this is really true for women, is it's when you think about how women encounter sex. And I am 34, so I came of age sort of with the Internet, but it wasn't a fully developed force in my life when I was 12. Uh, so what was the first thing that I read about sex? It was narratives about rape and sexual molestation in teen magazines, where it's presented as like a problem or an issue, and it's just this painful zone. And so I think that that gave me, and like a bunch of women of a similar age, a very sort of tangled up idea of sex and consent. And so in that sense, reading romance novels was this incredible corrective force in my life, right? It allowed me to map those hormones and that sexual imagery and that excitement onto a narrative where you're role wasn't passive victim, right? Where the reward wasn't you've been deemed so overwhelmingly appealing that a man can't help himself and he has to attack you. But it was, this is a thing you participate in equally. This is an act that brings you active joy, pleasure, excitement, and your interest in pursuing that male object is just as keen and just as much a focal point. And this is actually one of the places where I think Twilight is really, really interesting, despite being very problematic. So Bella is incredibly passive. Uh, she's very weak. Edward is really controlling, and he polices her sexuality really aggressively, because the narrative is basically like, if they go

too fast, he'll kill her. That's not the best narrative in the entire world. But when you look about how that actually plays out in the narrative, what that means is that Bella is given this free expanse to be as lustful as she wants to be and never have to deal with the adverse consequences of that, because somebody else is playing umpire. Somebody else is the traffic cop, and she can just be free flowing, untrammelled lust.

Vanessa 19:27 Yup. What you're talking about is also why that women in these books are taught to be passive until the point where they are just so undeniably seductive by their very being that a man has to rape her, is how we get to Donald Trump saying that "she's not my type, and therefore I wouldn't rape her," and misunderstandings about rape as a violent act rather than as a lustful act.

Margaret 19:48 Right.

Vanessa 19:49 And so it's like, actually, again, romance novels are so healthy because they give us, like, a better understanding of what consensual sex looks like, so that we know that attraction does not lead to rape. Attraction leads to consensual sex.

Margaret 20:03 Right.

Vannesa 20:04 And rape is about something else entirely.

20:07 [MUSIC STING]

Vanessa 20:09 So, what we're deciding about this young woman is, you're definitely not reading too many romance novels.

Margaret 20:16 Definitely not. I don't think that's your problem.

Vanessa 20:19 Is she maybe reading the quote unquote "wrong romance novels"?

Margaret 20:23 Without more information about what expectations they've given her, I super couldn't speak to that. But if you're expecting a level of excitement and love and joy based on romance novels, that your relationship isn't giving you on a date and day basis, that's something to pay attention to. That's not something to write off.

Vanessa 20:46 And so, is the advice we're giving, dump him? It's not necessarily dump him, right? It's just--

Margaret 24:50 No.

Vanessa 24:50 Like, say I'm not ready for marriage.

Margaret 20:52 Yeah, exactly. I'd need way more information before I said dump him.

Vanessa 20:57 I mean, she's not listening 'cause she didn't ask us, so--

Margaret 20:59 But I would say, if you're about to make a huge decision, and you don't know it's the right one, and no one is forcing you to make it on a particular timeline, don't make it yet. Slow your roll a little bit and try and understand what certainty would look like for you, and what joy in a relationship would look like for you.

Vanessa 21:21 My sister-in-law did something that I thought was so trite. She was visiting right when I broke up with somebody, and I was like, but he was so right for me. He had this culture. Like, he had all of these boxes. And she was like, "Let's make a new kind of list. Let's list everything that actually, like, really matters to you. Like, not 'he spent time in Hungary and your dad is from Hungary, so he could speak to dad in Hungarian.'"

Margaret 21:49 [Laughs] Right.

Vanessa 25:49 Like, that's a nice perk, but like, who cares?

Margaret 21:52 That's not something you can date for.

Vanessa 21:53 [Laughs] Right. And it's so funny, how like, that list, when, I-- and like she really held my feet to the fire on it-- I was like, oh, I actually like, don't care if he's funny. Right? Like, It like, he has to like, have a sense of joy and humor.

Margaret 22:09 Right.

Vanessa 22:09 But like--

Margaret 22:09 If he's not making good jokes, you're gonna be fine.

Vanessa 22:13 Right.

Margaret 22:13 You want the male idea of "has a good sense of humor," which is laughs at my jokes.

Vanessa 22:17 Right!

Margaret 22:18 [Laughs]

Vanessa 22:18 It turned out to be this, like, really productive thought experiment where we spent a couple of hours really interrogating everything that I thought I wanted, and now I've found my dream man. He's not funny.

Margaret 22:29 [Laughs]

Vanessa 22:30 He thinks he's funny.

Margaret 22:32 That's the best kind of not funny for a man to be. [Laughs]

Vanessa 22:37 He thinks I'm funny.

Margaret 22:38 That's actually the best kind of not funny for a man to be. Finds his female partner hilarious.

Vanessa 22:43 He does. He's like, she's the funny one. And I'm like, true. Not your job. Your job is to cook and get stains out of my dresses. My job's to be hilarious.

Margaret 22:52 Yeah. And I think that's basically what this young woman needs to do. Is, you need to use what you've taken from romance novels. Think about what set off a fireworks display in your head, and translate that into real expectations and real hopes and dreams for you and your partners.

Vanessa 23:12 And I really want to thank you because I like, I now don't judge my friends.

Margaret 23:16 [Laughs]

Vanessa 23:17 I'm like, oh, like, what you want is somebody who's like noticing that it would mean a lot to you to just cook a meal. Right? And like, that's a fair thing to want.

Margaret 23:28 It's one of the most complicated things. Uh, how to value something you've asked for, and how much you need to ask for before it's too much?

Vanessa 23:40 Right. Right. So well said. Well, Margaret H. Willison, thank you so much for being here.

Margaret 23:47 Thank you so much for having me. I had a wonderful time.

Vanessa 23:50 I'm going to bring your advice back to Julia, and we will come to a final conclusion.

Margaret 23:54 Fantastic.

Vanessa 23:55 Yes. On this young woman's fate.

Margaret 23:57 Right. This young woman who has no idea this podcast exists and didn't ask our advice.

Vanessa 24:02 Correct.

Margaret 24:03 I hope she hears it and takes it to heart.

Vanessa 24:06 Me too.

Margaret 24:06 'Cause it's great advice. We're very smart.

Vanessa 24:09 We really are.

24:10 [MUSIC]

Vanessa 24:15 So Julia, what did you think about what Margaret had to say?

Julia 24:18 I thought it was interesting that she said that it can be paternalistic to say that women can't distinguish between fictional and real happy endings, but that seems to be the problem that the woman on Reddit is having.

Vanessa 24:32 I think that Margaret was saying that that is a story that the patriarchy tells us. That, like, men's imaginations are great, but when a woman pretends, it's unhealthy and she's not going to be able to tell the difference between the dream and reality. When of course women are smart enough to tell the difference between dreams and reality. And the reality is that this young woman's not ready to marry this guy. And so actually, romance novels are a great conditioning. They are conditioning women to expect more and expect better. Set high expectations and people will meet them.

Julia 25:08 Yeah, I love that romance novels aren't not affecting us and not conditioning us. It's that they're conditioning us, in a positive way, to imagine futures and set high expectations for ourselves so we can find that in our own real relationships.

Vanessa 25:23 I think basically what Margaret is saying, is it's not that you've read too many romance novels, it's that you either because of commitment reasons or because of youth or because he's the wrong guy, don't want to marry this guy.

Julia 25:35 And I think the Redditer has discerned here that maybe romance novels are the problem, and they're the problem in that her partner isn't matching up to the expectations that she should have for him.

Vanessa 25:48 Yeah. I don't think that this woman is like waiting for him to roll up on a white horse. I think maybe she is like, to Margaret's point, expecting him to like, know when maybe she needs a nice gesture. Like I used to judge my friends for, right? And that is an okay thing to expect from your partner. Men, for the most part, really expect it from women. And I don't want to tell men to lower their expectations. I just think women should raise theirs. And I think that romance novels can allow you to like, practice and imagine dating without dating. Right? I think romance novels actually give you all sorts of data in a safe way. So Julia, I think we've changed the title of the segment from "Stop Imagining Having Good Sex" to "There's No Such Thing As Too Many Romance Novels".

Julia 26:42 True. There's no such thing as too much good sex.

Vanessa 26:46 [Laughs]

Julia 26:48 "Stop Imagining Having Good Sex" was a joke.

Vanessa 26:51 Really?

Julia 26:52 That was not my actual recommendation.

Vanessa 26:54 So where are you going now?

Julia 26:56 I'm going to floss my teeth. I have a dentist appointment tomorrow.

Vanessa 26:59 Hmm. Can I come?

Julia 27:00 Of course. Are you gonna floss my teeth, or you're going to floss your own teeth?

Vanessa 27:03 I'm just gonna watch.

Julia 27:04 Ooh, fun.

Vanessa 27:06 I'll entertain you while you floss your teeth.

Julia 27:08 Will you sing me a song?

Vanessa 27:09 Yes. But Julia, before we stop imagining good sex, we have a big announcement to make. Which is that our Patreon is up and running. So if you are enjoying the show and wanna support our ability to keep it going and hopefully have a season 2 one day, then you can support us on Patreon. We have some amazing perks on there. We have extended interviews, because we have these incredible experts, and we can't use all of the

brilliant things that they say. We have special reviews from me on what romance novel I'm currently reading, and that is exclusive Patreon content. Only for those of you who support us on Patreon. So please go and check out our Patreon, Hot And Bothered. And we really appreciate your support. So now, Julia, let's definitely stop imagining having good sex.

27:55 [Music]

Vanessa 27:57 This has been "No Such Thing As Too Many Romance Novels," an episode of Hot & Bothered. A big thanks to Margaret H. Willison. Everybody go subscribe to her newsletter, Too Bossy Dames. It is fantastic. And follow us on Twitter and Instagram @theROMpod. Leave us a five star review on iTunes, and we are a coproduction of Not Sorry Productions and Spoke Media.

Julia 28:20 We are executive produced by Vanessa Zoltan and Ariana Nedelman. Our Reddit question was chosen by me, Julia Argy. We are edited by Chelsea Harrison. Our production team is Brigid Goggin, Janielle Kastner, Caroline Hamilton, Jenna Hannum, Will Short, and Alexander Mark, and our music is from First Com. Thanks so much, and I'll talk to you next week.