

H&B Episode 19

[MUSIC]

Vanessa: Julia, happy Thanksgiving.

Julia: Happy Thanksgiving to you too.

Vanessa: Am I one of the things that you're most grateful for? Like am I Top 2?

Julia: Yeah, definitely.

Vanessa: Great. Glad we got that out of the way. You're my top five.

Julia: Wow. What's above?

Vanessa: You're just like in my top five. I don't want to tell you where you are. Maybe you're number one.

Julia: I'm going to demote you.

[MUSIC]

Vanessa: I think we should call this one grid locked on this problem. What about you? What do you think it should be called?

Julia: Pump the brakes.

Vanessa: Ooh. Okay. Do you want me to start reading?

Julia: Sure. Go ahead.

[MUSIC]

Vanessa: I am a 26 year old woman and my 26 year old boyfriend was in a car accident and found religion. My boyfriend and I have been dating for a little over two years. We've lived together for over a year now. He was in a car accident last week and found out some medically life changing information about himself. As he's healing, he tells me he found God. I have no problems with this. He's just had a near brush with death. He asks me if I'll get angry if he tries to convert me and I'm honest with him and tell him that yes. He asks if I'll at least be open to trying to find God and if I'll say a prayer that helps God reveal himself to you. I appease him and say, sure, but no promises that it'll do anything for me. I

consider myself agnostic. I don't really give whatever higher power I believe in a name. I also don't practice anything or go to church.

Julia: Anyway, my boyfriend asked if I'd be okay with not having sex until we're married. I don't consider us ready for marriage and probably not for at least another year and a half. I tell him I would have a problem with this. I told him I respect his religious beliefs and practices, but ultimately that this would probably be a deal breaker for me. He started tearing up and saying, I thought we were stronger than this. I would do anything for you. He asked about if having a short engagement would change my answer or if we still had sex, would my answer change? I told him I don't want him to have sex with me just to make me stay. I felt insulted and like he was trying to throw me a bone. Am I being horrible? Do I not really love him if I can't abstain from sex for a year or more? Is he asking a lot from me?

[MUSIC]

Julia: Vanessa, is he asking a lot from her?

Vanessa: Yes.

[AD BREAK]

Vanessa: So For her it seems like it's more, it's like, no, I'm not going to stop having sex, which is something that I don't think is like sinful or that needs to be within the bounds of marriage because you've had this religious revelation. It doesn't feel like she's saying, I'm sorry I need sex more regularly so I'm not going to wait for a year. I bet if it was for a medical reason that he couldn't have sex for a year and a half, she would be fine with it. Right. If he was in a car accident that made him like paralyzed in some way where like he needed to be healing in a certain way that he couldn't have sex, I am sure that this woman would be like, that's fine. We won't have sex for a year. But the fact that she does not believe that like religion should get in the way with sex, she's like, no, that is completely changing our value system and the way that we interact with each other. I think she's completely within her rights.

Julia: I think part of what's going on here is what you touched on that there's a change kind of in the rules in their relationship where they started out being on the same page when it came to their religious faith and, and now after this car accident, after he found God, they're in an inter-religious relationship and that's not something that she knew or expected when they started their relationship.

Vanessa: I really, really hate that he says, I thought we were stronger than this, I would do anything for you. Like it's just not true. And so like it's so manipulative. And I guess I do believe absolutely in unconditional love, and I think if my partner were to become very religious in a way that that would not like jive with me, I think I would still love him and not want to be in a relationship with him anymore. Living a religious life is, is a daily and constant devotional practice that like I have chosen not to engage in for a lot of reasons, and so if suddenly Peter were to become like a very devout Catholic and like wanted to dedicate a lot of his life to that, I think I would still love him and decouple myself from him.

Julia: I think in the circumstance you just described, I would handle it a little differently. I think part of my sticking point is that he's trying to convert her and he's trying to get her to believe what he believes and she says she's fine with him finding God. I think part of the problem here is that this is not a daily contemplative practice that he is doing by himself in the morning that he's feeling the need to wrap her up in his transformation and that's actually what's pushing her away the most is not the God aspect because she says she believes in something, she just doesn't want to put a name to it. He's forcing her to believe what he believes.

Vanessa: Well he's at least forcing her to change her behavior and I think yes, you're pushing me to be more specific. Like if Peter started going to church on Sunday mornings I'd be like great. Right? Like I hope you have a like more meaningful relationship in the world that like makes you loving and happy. But if I was suddenly being asked to like have crosses hung in my house, once it started asking things of me that I didn't believe in, that is where I think I would like really come to a sticking point. And she is being asked to engage in something that she doesn't believe in, which is abstaining from sex until marriage. She's like, I don't believe in abstaining from sex until marriage and like...I think if she was on the same page as him there'd be something incredibly romantic about this. Like we are having a spiritual journey together. But it is the coercive part of it that is like really troubling to me. One of the most beautiful things I've ever seen in my entire life was at one of my cousins ultra Orthodox weddings where it was such a specific moment. She was a woman who had been proposed to several times and had said no, even though she was very Orthodox and she was getting quote unquote like too old within the community to be saying no to men. But she was like, I want to wait for a love match. And she found a man and fell in love with him even though she was like so old, like 26 or something and under the Chuppah like everybody watched them touch for the first time. Like hold hands for the first time. And it was such a powerful and spiritual and beautiful thing to watch and I found it deeply moving. But it was within those exact circumstances where it was like two people who had really waited for each other and had the exact same like ethics and values and beliefs that made all of that so beautiful. And I wonder if it

was like gross and weird of me with my secular gaze to be sitting there and only seeing the beauty of it and like not thinking about any of the sacrifice or you know, horny nights that they were like, this sucks.

Julia: So I guess you've brought up what part of religion adds to love and what in some ways elevates it beyond what we normally think of as love. Is there a spiritual aspect that makes it somehow more important, more exciting, and more beautiful to have a really cohesive spiritual connection as well as a romantic connection?

Vanessa: Yeah, I just think it's really complicated. I think it's complicated when like we fetishize religion as like adding a forbidden quality to, you know, sex. I think it's complicated when we impose ideas of virginity onto women's bodies, I think it's, I really don't like that certain religions consider masturbation sin. But then I also think the confines of religion can elevate relationship.

[MUSIC]

Vanessa: So I think we should probably talk to someone smarter than we are on this topic.

Julia: Let's do it.

[AD BREAK]

Vanessa: Hi Lauren. Do you mind introducing yourself?

Lauren: Hi, I'm Lauren Sandler and for the past 20 years I have been writing about gender issues in books and columns, um, and in my own reporting and part of that reporting led me years ago to write a book about the young Christian right, which actually came out of a series that I produced for *All Things Considered*. And during the Bush era, I reported this book about how people were winning hearts and minds with an eye towards politics. Um, ever since then I've shifted away from religion a bit, um, but still kept my focus on gender. And my new book, which will be coming out in April, is about a year in the life of a young homeless mother here in Brooklyn where I live.

Vanessa: Okay. So what I'm going to do first is just read this Reddit question to you and get your point of view on this problem that nobody cares about our opinion on. But that doesn't stop us from asking anyway. So this is a 26 year old female writing about her 26 year old boyfriend. So it says, my boyfriend and I have been dating for a little over two years...am I being horrible? Do I really not love him if I can't abstain from sex for a year or more? Or is he asking a lot from me? What are your thoughts?

Lauren: Oh man. So I should preface this by saying something, um, which will be very obvious about me, which is I'm a die-hard atheist and um, and my partner is too. And so we've talked about this scenario before about what would happen if one of us found God in a deep, deep way. Um, the thing that gets really tricky is not just the notion of some belief, but the notion that sex is tied to it in this way. Um, how on earth we have a relationship between faith in a power and what we should be doing with our bodies in terms of pleasure is something that I have struggled with conceptually ever since I had a body that could experience pleasure or a sense of what people meant when they talked about God. And so I think that people change and I think that the woman who wrote in is experiencing her boyfriend changing in a way that sounds pretty unworkable. Um, this notion that he will do anything for her... I don't know it, to me it just seems it seems hollow and it also seems like this is not the way that people need to set up a sexual connection between the two of them, much less a sense of world values. It's doesn't sound like he's seen a light that made sense of his life without connecting all of the usual problematic baggage around shame and pleasure and I don't know how she could possibly go forth with this. And it's heartbreaking.

Vanessa: I truly believe that, that people can have really healthy relationships with God in my life, but also I grew up around Orthodox Jews where the power dynamic once religion enters into conversations and relationship is just clearly on the side of the man and the fact that this particular question is manifesting in that way where the man is using religion as a tool of manipulation to try to control his girlfriend just really puts me off.

Lauren: I'm with you.

Vanessa: I mean, so my problem is right, the, and you just, you know more about this than I do. It seems to me that religious romance would have to fetishize an idealized version of religion. And so I'm wondering if you could talk to us just a little bit about the field of Christian romance, if you have a sense of who reads it. Is it, is it Christian people trying to take seriously what romance would look like within their ideals? Or is it people outside of those faith ideas who are fetishizing the religion?

Lauren: So there are two different, um, answers to that. One is for people who are believers, mainly women who are believers, this is a type of novel which is sanctioned. and that in and of itself is a relatively recent thing. For a lot of very serious evangelicals and there are still some who continue to believe this, novels were the devil's work, fiction was not permitted at all. It was really only in the '80s that Christian publishing began to really embrace fiction as something that was possible, and with it there became a slowly emerging romance field. this emerged in two ways. One was Christian writers who thought, okay, this is a reasonable

way for me to write to women. And another group — and honestly, the more successful group I found — are secular women who find God and then shift the way that they write. Um, so people who have been writing romance novels for awhile become born again and then work within a very sort of circumspect frame around what is appropriate for a romance novel. But this has two different purposes. One is to just offer books that women want to love within a Christian community, but — and to me, this is the more significant part — it also functions as an evangelical very explicitly and very, very intentionally. The idea being, okay, if you have a friend who isn't saved and you hand her a copy of a Christian romance novel, can she find the light of God through reading a book. In the same way that romance novels and indeed most novels really affect our hearts, can these novels affect one's heart for God and deliver someone to him? I first discovered this genre back almost 20 years ago when I was reporting about it for Salon. And over the years I've purged my book collections and there are things that I've gathered for my own reporting that you know, end up in used bookstores or on the sidewalk. But Francine Rivers' *Redeeming Love* is one that will last forever on my bookshelf because it really does feel profoundly like something. And *Redeeming Love* is a historical novel set in the 1850s and the California gold rush that follows a young woman named Angel who is a prostitute across the country and into the brothels of Sacramento. And there's a man named Michael Hosea who God tells, this is your woman, Angel is your woman. Make her your wife and find her heart for me. And should I just like read you a paragraph of it because it's so delicious to me?

Vanessa: Please.

Lauren: Okay. All right. Ready? She looked up and saw Michael standing before her, a small flame burned where his heart was. No beloved. His mouth hadn't moved and the voice was not his. The flame grew larger and brighter, spreading until his entire body was radiant with it. Then the light separated from Michael and came the last few feet toward her. It was a man, glorious and magnificent, light streaming from him in all directions. Who are you? She whispered, terrified. And of course the answer to that question is God. And it's really spectacular cause we've been through, you know, Angel's trials and tribulations for 400 pages before this moment when God appears to her. And I will tell you, it feels profound. It did not convert me. But man, this is the stuff.

Vanessa: So I am also a very devout atheist, but one of the most beautiful things I ever saw in my entire life was I have a cousin who is Shomer Negiah, so she was not, she'd never touched a man until she was married and her husband was also Shomer Negiah so he'd never touched a woman. And you know, it's in the middle of the Jewish wedding ceremony where the couple's married and therefore can touch for the first time. And watching the two of them sort of like hold hands and

then wrap each other around each other and touch each other for the first time was genuinely one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen in my entire life. And completely overwhelmed me and you know, and I was like, this is an oppressive institution. This gets people to just start having babies younger in order to like propagate a race. Like I know all the downsides of it. But that was a moment where I was like, religion has elevated this romance.

Lauren: Oh, completely. I mean, we all know how hot forbidden love is. And honestly I think that when, when intimacy is its most transcendent to me, it can feel like the presence of God. Um, I don't think it's accidental that these things conjoin in a certain way. But, um, while I can imagine being so overwhelmed by that moment as well, the notion that they would have to do it in front of an audience is something so perplexing to me. These notions of how there are all of these public determinants and then public performances of what physical intimacy can be.

Vanessa: Right. And then they are given a moment of privacy, but it's like a public form of privacy where the couple disappears for a short period of time and it's the first time they're allowed alone together. It is highly, highly ritualized. In a way that I don't know, just as somebody who completely left Judaism, whenever I go as a spectator, it does feel like I'm objectifying it and yearning for it. And like there, there are just moments of it where I'm like, Oh man, I gave up a lot by like not choosing to walk this path. But I know that right? Like I'm only seeing the most beautiful day of it when I go and interact with it on a wedding day. I feel like romance novels get us a glimpse of those like wedding day type moments.

Lauren: I think they definitely do. But I think that they also, do the other part of it, which is demonize, you know, physical intimacy and treat it as a threat or think about what it means to redeem a fallen woman. That's why this book is called *Redeeming Love*. And I think that there's something incredibly powerful of course, about building desire, about thinking about things that are forbidden to you, about really having the stakes be so high around intimacy that can make love feel more profound. But at the same time, there's something about it that feels, you know, like it, it's robbing women of their own power to make choices around their, their bodies and their desires that are simply relevant to their own experiences. Um, though perhaps I'm being, I'm being a little bit, um, too aggressive in my own thinking about this because I suppose it just is my own thinking about it. I know it's not everyone's, but I do struggle with it. And I do think though that in terms of how fiction functions, there can be really great material here if you're willing to go into that private space, which is why these books are so effective. And honestly they make up two thirds of the Christian market. So in a world of failing publishing models, romance is always the last great hope because of how women want to read and what women want to buy and how these models make literature accessible to people. And I think that it's worth paying attention to Christian

publishing because they have definitely seen that women are the book buyers and this is what women want to buy either to convert or to experience some sort of alternative way of living themselves, living other people's lives through novels.

Vanessa: Do you know if any of these have sort of proven conversion rates?

Lauren: I mean, that's such a good question.

Vanessa: Do people get converted by these?

Lauren: Well, when I interviewed authors, they of course said that they did.

Vanessa: Right

Lauren: You know, I think that the question of how people get converted is always a very complicated thing. Um, I mean, I remember when I was doing a lot of reporting in mega churches, I cry in church all the time. You know, and some of that is about the, the rhetoric of sermons, some of that is about the power of even really bad worship bands.

Vanessa: Totally

Lauren: Christian music is, is engineered to have you respond to it, but then so is all music. Um, just the notion of being together in community with hands and voices lifted up, it is a powerful thing. And I think that if I weren't someone who was so committed both philosophically, intellectually, and just in my own, you know, in my own cells on some level to my own, a-religiousness and my own atheism, there are plenty of moments when I could have experienced being moved as some notion of the truth that had eluded me. And I certainly have that experience reading fiction all the time. It's why I read fiction constantly is to have those emotional experiences and to feel my heart changed. And I think that if it's something that you are open to or something that you are craving in your life, if it's something that you're looking for even more so, I, I can see how a moment like that could confirm something that you were already leaning towards. And if you're not someone who's going to feel it in church, but you need to feel it alone under your covers at night, um, I can see how that could be effective. But not because the book is doing the conversion, but because one is primed for it and looking for one's heart to change.

Vanessa: So I think that part of what's so offensive to me about this Reddit question is the fact that he is trying to convert her. And I have like a very strong bias against conversion that I like cannot separate from my Jewish upbringing... you know in Judaism you are like never supposed to evangelize or try to convert. In fact like

the person who wants to convert has to ask three times. It's like this very intense experience to convert. And so it's just interesting that these romance novels that are trying to convert people seem to be trying to do the same thing that this man is doing, which is using sex in order to try to convert people.

Lauren: Okay. But imagine that you really do believe that hell is real and it is worse than anything you can imagine. And imagine that you really do believe that if someone you love has not accepted Jesus Christ as a personal savior, that person will spend their life in hell. You, I mean, I would do anything in that moment to convert the person that I love and frankly anyone just almost as a humanist. Who, who would ever want another human being to spend their life in hell if you believe that it's real? I can completely imagine that experience because I know that I have my own versions of it politically. It's how I feel about feminism. It's how I feel about what it means to live in poverty on this earth. There are things that to me feel so unbearable that another person would have to live under a form of oppression that I will do almost anything to try to change the parameters so that someone doesn't have to live that way and that's temporarily on earth. So on the one hand, I completely agree with you. I mean, imagine how much I agree with you as a Jewish atheist. You know, we're off the hook for this stuff. We don't believe in hell in the same way and we don't believe in bringing someone into faith in the same way whether we are faithless or incredibly faithful. But if that is what you believe is absolutely true in the world, why would you not use anything to do it? Whether it's this Reddit guy or whether you're writing a romance novel.

Vanessa: Yeah. I once got very offended, somebody stopped being my friend freshman year of college because she didn't want to make friends on earth that she wasn't going to be able to spend eternity with. And I remember being very offended that she didn't try to convert me. I was like, why wouldn't you want to save me? Like, why are you cutting me out instead of trying to save my eternal soul?

Lauren: That is pretty brutal.

Vanessa: I know. I was like, that is so hurtful.

Lauren: It's funny when I was, um, when I was reporting my book *Righteous*, which was my book about the young Christian right, um, I'll never forget this moment where I was having dinner at the home of a couple of young evangelicals in Seattle. And they were so smart and so interesting and we had a real connection, you know, she drove a Vespa and was a women's studies student and he was really into bands that I liked and we just had this really terrific connection. And after dinner, I will never forget him sitting in his big arm chair in his living room and looking at me and saying, you know, Lauren, we have a lot in common and I really like you, but this is as far as it goes. And it was the ultimate freeze out and I get it. Um, it

sucked. But it really made sense to me like, okay. And I was thinking about him when you were reading that Reddit question because if that is what you believe, there is a limit to how far a relationship can go. And I think it's tragic. I can't imagine believing it, but if that's what you feel and that's what you know, it makes sense.

Vanessa: Yeah. I think I'm leaving this conversation with you being much more sympathetic to this guy. I was like, he is trying to control her and he's not. Um, through my feminist atheist lens, I see it as him trying to control and manipulate her, but he's trying to save her.

Lauren: Right. But she's still has got to leave his ass.

[MUSIC]

Vanessa: Ugh, Lauren, thank you so much. Everybody go out and buy every book that Lauren Sandler has ever written.

Lauren: [laughs] It's such a pleasure talking to you, Vanessa. I feel like a kindred spirit.

Vanessa: I really do too, I now want to talk to you about the afterlife forever.

Lauren: We won't have forever, but [laughs]

Vanessa: [laughs] I would like to talk to you about the afterlife for the rest of this mortal life. How about that?

Lauren: Perfect. Sign me up.

Vanessa: Great, Lauren. I'll talk to you soon.

Lauren: Bye.

Vanessa: Okay, bye.

[MUSIC]

Vanessa: So Julia what I felt most compelled by in what Lauren said was that I do believe that this young man is really trying to save his girlfriend from hell. I like believe him that he's not trying to manipulate her, that this comes from an authentic and like genuine concern.

Julia: Yeah, it certainly when I read it did not occur to me that he thought she was going to hell and was trying to convert her for that reason. I was more thinking about he wanted this to be a part of her life so they could share it. I didn't really understand that he could be thinking that she was imminently at risk of something.

Vanessa: Again, like just based on how you just said it, I still think my conclusion is the same though, which is that they have to break up because they see the world in fundamentally different ways. And I believe him that it's coming from a good place now...and I still don't think that their relationship can or should survive this.

Julia: Well, I think that you and Lauren and I are all kind of in agreement about that. And I think perhaps the person who wrote this Reddit question is as well. And that's why she's struggling so much to figure out what to do in their relationship given this really sudden change.

Vanessa: Yeah. I mean the scary thing is the change, right? I would say that like the thing is that they're not married and so there seems to be an easier out and I'm just trying to think like you know, I'm in a deeply committed partnership with someone and if he were to find God, I would like to think...even if he suddenly believed in the afterlife, I would like to think that he and I would find a way to work through it. Something that Emily Nagowski said to us months ago now is that to love unconditionally is to love somebody who's constantly going to be changing. We're all changing all the time and...yeah, this question just scares me because I'm like, Oh, there would be certain changes that would really challenge me.

Julia: I don't think necessarily the hardest part of your partner finding God though is the belief necessarily. I think the part of this question that troubled me the most is the active conversion. And so if Peter found God but just like prayed at night and didn't want you to pray with him, maybe that would be fine. But he would have to be trying to change you as well.

Vanessa: Yeah. But you know, and this is something that I heard in divinity school and that I think Lauren said really well, you know, if, if you believe in this type of God, right, and obviously there are a million different gods to believe in and, but if, if you believe that the person you love is going to hell, it is an act of love to try to convert them. He deeply means this is an act of love.

Julia: Yes, I am now compelled by that as a possibility.

Vanessa: Which is why I try to convert everybody to be dog people. Having a dog makes you live longer. I'm just trying to save you all.

Julia: I thought you were going to say cat people go to hell.

Vanessa: [laughs] No. Do you still want to call this episode pump the brakes?

Julia: Absolutely.

Vanessa: So our advice is to break up, pump the brakes, turn on the emergency brake, turn around, drive in the other direction, buckle up,

Julia: Put your hazards on.

Vanessa: What about instead of pump the brakes, Let this drive a wedge between you.

Julia: Beautiful. Really poetic.

Vanessa: Thank you.

[MUSIC]

Vanessa: Julia I'm going to go home and do laundry. Do you want to come?

Julia: Definitely not, but thanks for the invite.

Vanessa: Wow. Rude.

Julia: I don't even want to do my own laundry, let alone help with yours.

Vanessa: We used to be laundry buddies. We used to be so close. Why are you letting this drive a wedge between us?

Julia: No.

Vanessa: Good. Stay firm.

Julia: Well, it's been real. TTYL

[MUSIC]

Vanessa: This has been Let This Drive a Wedge Between You an episode of Hot and Bothered. Go check out Lauren Sandler's books. She is fantastic. One and Only is just one of my favorite reads. It really is. Follow us on Twitter and Instagram at therompod and leave us a review on iTunes and please support us on Patreon on you can get extra love advice from us. What could possibly be better. We are

a coproduction of Not Sorry Productions and Spoke Media executive produced by me, Vanessa Zoltan and Ariana Nedelman. Associate produced by Julia Argy and Chelsea Ursin. Our production team is Bridget Goggin. Hannah Goldbach, Janielle Kastner, Caroline Hamilton, Jenna Hannam, Will Short Alexander Mark and Jonathan Villalobos. Thanks so much, and we'll talk to you next week.