

## Hot & Bothered Episode 17

VANESSA: Hi Julia.

JULIA: Hi Vanessa.

VANESSA: How are you?

JULIA: I'm good.

VANESSA: Please update everybody on your tooth saga.

JULIA: Well, I got a metal rod screwed in my face and then after that happened I recommended a book to my dentist that has a lot of sex in it.

VANESSA: I've done that too. I've recommended books with a lot of sex in them to people who afterwards I've been like maybe that was inappropriate.

JULIA: He asked about what I was reading and I was just being honest. I wasn't like, hey, like 60 year old dentist man who reads a lot of nautical fiction. This I think is a really good match for you.

VANESSA: How does it feel to have this metal rod in your face?

JULIA: I've never looked better.

**[MUSIC]**

VANESSA: So what is this week's episode called?

JULIA: Delete your social media.

VANESSA: I wouldn't call it that. I would say social media should only be for photos of baby animals.

JULIA: That's a great idea.

VANESSA: Yeah. I don't want to delete my social media. I just only want it to be pictures of lambs and puppies.

JULIA: Mhmm

VANESSA: Okay I'll start reading the question.

**[MUSIC]**

VANESSA: I am a 32 year old man with a 26 year old girlfriend of one year. She likes pictures of a guy on Instagram, which makes me jealous. I met my girlfriend at work 18 months ago. She worked as an intern and I started giving her rides home. We started dating and now we have a great relationship. I know how the man of her dreams should look and act. We used to talk about it a lot in the car after work, before we started dating. I don't fit the looks or act like the man that she dreamed about. She hasn't mentioned this and I feel like she loves me for being me.

JULIA: Nine months ago, another intern B started. B is a part time model and a lead singer of a semi famous band. He fits the look and act of my girlfriend's dream. She started talking a lot about B, B did this at work today, B is so cool, et cetera. After a week I told her I wasn't interested about hearing about B every day. She apologized and stopped talking about him. Their internships ended and they started school together. She doesn't talk about him anymore, but she shows interest on Instagram. She likes nine out of 10 pictures he posts, she never comments on them. She follows 150 people on Instagram - fashion and her girlfriends, plus some other guys from school - but rarely likes other pictures. The amount of Instagram attention she gives B is very far from normal Instagram activity for her. I feel so jealous about her liking his pictures on Instagram and I really want to know why she does it. At the same time I know my jealousy is stupid and I need to stop Instagram stalking her likes, but I don't know how. Should I delete Instagram or tell her about my jealousy?

VANESSA: Like this is so dumb. Like,

JULIA: [laughs]

**[AD BREAK]**

VANESSA: Like you should tell people about your feelings and snidely saying, I don't wanna hear about him every day was your first missed opportunity of saying to her, your relationship with B makes me really jealous. Can we talk about it? I feel like I'm not the man of your dreams and he is. Like just talk about it and definitely stop stalking her on Instagram. You have some deep insecurities in your relationship.

JULIA: Mhmm. Definitely.

VANESSA: I will also take a minute to sympathize with him like it doesn't feel good to know that your partner is attracted to somebody else and it sounds like she probably is

attracted to B. The thing is like we all have to tolerate a certain amount of like our partner finds this other kind of person attractive also and I'm not, none of us can be everything to our partner and so I think living with just a little bit of jealousy is normal and should be tolerable and should be managed through upfront conversation and not through Instagram data analytics.

JULIA: I love all the data he collects in this question. I think it's, it's so interesting. He knows not only the number of followers but the breakdown of percentages about what kind of people she follows. He's really done a lot of anxiety stalking of his girlfriend who I'm sure he sees all the time. Instagram, if you're looking for a new employee, this person really is in touch.

VANESSA: He could literally just say to her like, repeat after me, man who's not listening: Hey, your friendship with B is making me feel a little insecure. Can we talk about it? That's it.

JULIA: Do you think she's doing anything wrong?

VANESSA: Of course not. He should probably shouldn't have been dating an intern. This whole relationship sounds not great to me in general. Rather than talking to her, he Insta-stalks her and I don't know, you shouldn't start dating someone while they're an intern and you're not. I like, there's obviously not a lot of information here, but the two options of should I delete my Instagram or tell her about my jealousy...

JULIA: Yes to both

VANESSA: [laughs] But what about the baby pictures of animals, Julia?

JULIA: It sounds like he's not using Instagram for that. He's using it to stalk his girlfriend.

VANESSA: That's not going to solve the problem. The jealousy is not going to go away if you delete your Instagram.

JULIA: I don't know anything about this person, but I imagine about what he could do with all of his free time when he wasn't worrying about this anymore. And I feel really sad for him.

VANESSA: Like he could learn how to bake me a delicious cake.

JULIA: He could learn a new language. He could be out there speaking Mandarin.

VANESSA: Do you think that she's doing something wrong?

JULIA: No, not really. I think if I was in this circumstance and something I was doing that I didn't care that much about was making my partner uncomfortable, I would stop. Even if I didn't think it was wrong.

VANESSA: She doesn't know it's making him uncomfortable.

JULIA: I know, I'm just saying when he eventually deletes his Instagram and brings this up, maybe she would stop. I don't know. It's not, it's not that high stakes. Unless she is actually in love with him and this is the demise of their relationship. And he was right all along.

VANESSA: So I like every single photo that Hugh Jackman posts on Instagram, like every single one. And I am in love with Hugh Jackman. Like I watched that movie where he fought a robot because I, Hugh Jackman was in it, so I went and I saw it. That is how much I love Hugh Jackman. I still want to be in a relationship with my partner. Like just because you have a huge crush on someone doesn't mean that you don't want to be in your relationship. She could be lusting after B and like enjoy looking at pictures of him on Instagram and still want to be in a relationship with her boyfriend.

JULIA: Yeah, but B isn't, she goes to school with him. He's not Hugh Jackman. He's around and I think that's probably why it makes the boyfriend especially uncomfortable is that they have a friendship and they have a connection. I know you have a connection with Hugh Jackman, but it's a little different.

VANESSA: [laughs] I cannot believe that you just implied that Hugh Jackman isn't like around in my life.

JULIA: He is spiritually around in your life.

VANESSA: I just saw him in concert a couple months ago. We were in the same building recently. Okay?

**[MUSIC]**

JULIA: I think part of what's interesting in this question is his language around the man of her dreams and what her dream man is. It seems like part of the intrigue of B for the girlfriend is that he or his type of person is part of her fantasy life rather than her real life. And that is what is pushing the boyfriend to be really worried is that this is her fantasy and he's not meeting that fantasy.

VANESSA: Right. So which is an anxiety that like you hear men also express about like about romance heroes, right? Like, well, I'm never going to be a Duke. Like I'm never going to be Fabio. I'm never gonna like roll up on my motorcycle. And I just, [sighs] I just think that it's like over-simplifying women's ability to be, like, I fantasize about wanting a man with a motorcycle and long hair who walks around shirtless, but like actually motorcycles are really dangerous and long hair sounds like it takes a lot of time to wash in the morning and I want access to the bathroom. Right? Like I think that women are able to like separate out their fantasy lives and their romance heroes. I also just think that we like mock women when they have crushes and we don't mock men when they have crushes. Right? Like my brothers get to talk about like how hot Charlize Theron is and like if I'm like Hugh Jackman, I make a like joke about how dreamy he is and I like talk about his tap dancing. I've made it a bit. Right. I've been like, he's such a hard worker and I just love how he like whatever. At the end of the day, he's like a tall, handsome man with a great accent, but my brothers just get to be like, Oh, Charlize Theron. So beautiful. And like, that's it. So it's like the male gaze gets to just be a fact and the female gaze is like constantly under scrutiny and mockery. And like I, it's why romance novels are considered trash. It's the covers, right? I feel like there is a movement right now like Jasmine Guillory, Helen Hwang, like Linda Holmes, all of these um romance authors are now having more sophisticated like women's fiction covers done and those books are being taken more seriously because of the covers. Whereas romance novelists who have those like Fabio type covers just aren't taken as seriously, right? Like those are not put out at a place like an independent bookstore, covers facing out being like check out new fiction. We consider it Walmart like Harlequin crap fiction if it has a hot man on the cover.

JULIA: And if bookstores don't feel like they can put those kinds of covers out, why is it that publishing keeps printing pictures of shirtless men if they're, if they're somehow considered trashy and they're somehow hurting the genre?

VANESSA: I don't understand it. Like I don't understand if it helps books sell.

JULIA: I'm also totally befuddled about who finds Fabio attractive. Why is he on so many? Is he hot? I, I don't think so.

VANESSA: I think that he was considered hot, like there was a time

JULIA: [laughs] and that time has passed

VANESSA: [laughs] that time has passed.

JULIA: I think that we should find that person who thinks Fabio is hot.

VANESSA: I don't know if we're going to be able to find anyone who thinks Fabio is hot, but I do know of a really smart romance cultural critic named JenReadsRomance who's prolific on Twitter and has a lot of opinions on romance covers, and so I think we should get her to weigh in. But also we have this great audio from a conversation that we cut short with Nichole Perkins on our Marissa episode, "Mom, Don't Listen," and so we're going to add some Nichole Perkins brilliance after we hear from Jen.

**[AD BREAK]**

JEN: Hi, this is Jen Prokop. I am JenReadsRomance on Twitter and also cohost of the Fated Mates podcast with Sarah McLean.

VANESSA: Okay. So we asked you to be on Hot and Bothered today to discuss something that whenever we mention that we're making a podcast about romance novels, people ask us, are you going to talk about the covers

JEN: [laughs]

VANESSA: And we thought that you as sort of the like brilliant critical fan of romances that you are would be a wonderful person for us to talk to about the covers. So first I just want to ask you, what do they tend to look like?

JEN: So obviously there's a lot of different like sub genres and I actually have like a working theory that like different sub genres kind of traffic in different cover design. But I think when people say that what they're really talking about is sort of the infamous abs cover, right? So it's just a man's chest. There's no head and sometimes he's holding a phallic symbol, right? It's a hockey stick or a, a baseball bat or whatever. Um, a sword. And I think that when people like, I think what they're asking is like, how could you seriously read a book with this on the cover?

VANESSA: Right

JEN: Right? And I've thought a lot about it because part of me wants to say like, Oh fuck you. Like I don't care. Right. So part of me would just wants to be angry. Like it's just such a superficial thing to say.

VANESSA: Literally it's a cliché, right? You can't judge a book by its cover.

JEN: Right! I mean, right. We say that for a reason, right? If you're just minding your own business, taking public transit to work or being with your family at some gathering, the last thing you want to do is put up with somebody giving you a hard time about what you're reading. And I don't know if it's shame as much as just like, I don't want to deal with you. I just want to enjoy my book.

VANESSA: Right.

JEN: Although when you look at old school covers with like Fabio, which I know people get all twerked up when we talk about them cause it was 800 years ago. Some of them are pretty sexy, but it's often the woman's body that's really displayed. And I feel like that is less common now.

VANESSA: Yeah.

JEN: I feel like now we're, it's like female gaze time.

VANESSA: I also really like, I love all these new covers, like the kiss quotients cover

JEN: Yes

VANESSA: Um, the new Sally Thorne books cover.

JEN: Mhmm

VANESSA: Like there's something very like art deco-y happening with covers.

JEN: Right

VANESSA: But I love those covers so much in part because they are moving so far away from the traditional covers. And I think like those are the romance novels that I buy in paperback because they look like women's fiction

JEN: Right

VANESSA: Covers not like romance covers.

JEN: I mean, and I think really what we're saying is, you know, it feels a little more acceptable to like have on your coffee table and um,

VANESSA: Right,

JEN: Right. It's a nod to the fact that physical books are items in our home that have that look a certain way. But I think we also have to ask ourselves some hard questions about it are we trying to like move romance into women's fiction and why? Why is this the cover that we think is going to sell now?

VANESSA: Well, so my question is, are we paying more for the right for it to not signal to the people around us that it's sexy, right? It looks the, the ones like the wedding date and the kiss quotient

JEN: Mhmm

VANESSA: look like they are romantic books, not like they are romance novels. So you don't realize like how raunchy and hot the sex scenes are going to be from looking at the cover.

JEN: Well, and I, I would say like a couple of different things, right? Like, so I work with a, I work with some amazing people and I'm always like slipping people romances and like there is a a gentleman who like the math teacher who sits next to me who is, um 65 years old and recently read The Kiss Quotient and loved it and I thought well maybe the bright side is it really is going to draw in some new readers into our beloved genre

VANESSA: Right

JEN: Who are like I didn't think I would like this but I was wrong. I, I prejudged it literally based on the cover maybe and, and I was wrong.

VANESSA: Yeah, it, it's also interesting like who right, who's making the decisions and deciding which of the books should pa-- quote unquote pass right as like non non romance romance and which ones should just be labeled as romance.

JEN: Well and if I'm going to spend money on a romance, I want to know that it's a romance and I feel like so many of these covers are really blurring the lines between like mainstream fiction and romance. And if I spend that much money on a book thinking I'm going to get a romance and I'm not, then I'm going to be disappointed and probably a little angry. And so I feel like the other thing it's done is I feel like I'm a pretty smart romance reader. I'm pretty savvy. I know what I'm looking at and can probably judge what I'm gonna get by looking at that cover. And I find myself really like frozen with indecision. Like when it was bookstore romance day, I bought a bunch of category romances. I was like, at least I know what I'm getting. I didn't have time to, you know, research some of these other books and find out if they're really romances. And that's what I don't like about it.



VANESSA: I love some of the new covers, but I think that part of wanting to read a romance is the guarantees involved, right? That

JEN: Yeah

VANESSA: It's going to be about two people falling in love. And I'm gonna get a happily ever after. And it was a Lisa Kleypas book, but I once got so spooked that I, she had written a book outside of the genre and I was like, am I, am I reading a not romance novel?

JEN: Yes! Right.

VANESSA: And, and I was really scared. I was like, someone is going to die. Something bad is gonna happen. And it turns out it was just a really well plotted romance novel that I like... But I do think that part of what got me to keep reading was I looked back at the cover and I was like, no, it's a romance novel.

JEN: It's a romance, yeah

VANESSA: It's going to be fine. And so I kept reading cause I was like, I do not want to read a book where the guy dies, you know?

JEN: Oh, God, no.

VANESSA: And so I agree with you. There's something so comforting about being able to look at the cover and be like, no, no, I'm in romance land. I'm fine.

JEN: You know, and that used to be something, I guess I would say I felt really uh confident in my ability to judge whether or not a book was going to deliver what I wanted. And now I am not confident in that at all. To me it is a real devil's bargain to say yes, we're going to have more mainstream acceptance and we will be treated more like literature if the answer is because we're not romance anymore.

VANESSA: Yeah.

JEN: Obviously I would love romance to have respect, but I would like romance to have respect as romance. Not as like, you know, hash like air quotes, women's fiction. If it's romance, it's romance. It deserves respect for being romance. I don't think we should have to like hide who we are and change what we do in order to get mainstream approval. That to me is not necessarily worth it.

**[MUSIC]**

VANESSA: Something that I'm interested in... So I would say that my favorite covers are ones with only women

JEN: Yeah

VANESSA: On the cover. I love like a lot of Julia Quinn's books. I've read a lot of Regency

JEN: Mhmm yeah

VANESSA: And a lot of Tessa Dare's books also are women in like beautiful gowns.

JEN: Gowns. Oh yeah.

VANESSA: And the, I mean, the fashion on these covers is incredible. Um, and it also, right, like it harkens back to a lot of like Disney princess

JEN: Mhmm

VANESSA: Things with me. Right? Like I know I'm being manipulated and so I, I love the aesthetic look of these. And then also all of the women are tiny and have these right, like very media approved bodies.

JEN: Right.

VANESSA: Um, and are like gorgeous in this way that I wonder if it's like allowing me to escape my own body issues by

JEN: Mhmm

VANESSA: imagining myself into one of these beautiful women or if it's reifying other issues by having these copies. Like would it be more exciting and subversive and sort of bad-ass to have someone who wasn't like beautiful and in a gorgeous gown on the cover?

JEN: Oh my God. Like you just raised like 700 questions at once. Cause of course it's not even just that they're like beautiful and thin. It's often that, you know, they're, they're white.

VANESSA: Yeah.

JEN: Right. So, I mean, one of the other like kind of questions I think like we really have to grapple with is, you know, are we also, um, like putting covers out there because we're afraid that like, you know, and I, I say we like publishing or whoever, all of us, you know, we're afraid that white, um, readers aren't going to pick up a book if they know it's about, um, black characters or LatinX characters or gay characters. And so by sort of homogenizing the look of the cover, we can just sort of like lure them in. And I think that just makes me feel yucky, but there's not really much I can do about it except to just continue to really like promote and buy books that I love that, that maybe break out of that cover mold.

VANESSA: Yeah

JEN: But the question of like, how we present women's bodies in covers, I mean, that's real. And sometimes I will explicitly read a book where the cover, you know, the heroine's described as being really curvy or being um, you know like a, a, a fat woman even or you know, whatever words are used by the author and the cover model is often not that way.

VANESSA: mhmm

JEN: And I, I, really appreciate very much books that have accurate representation because I feel like we're moving towards a place where I can find those heroines but I often don't really find them represented on the covers.

VANESSA: A Princess In Theory does a great job of that, Alyssa Cole's book.

JEN: Mhmm

VANESSA: The characters are described as dark skinned black people and then the people on the cover are dark skinned black people. She's described as having like curly hair, she has that on the cover, but like also they're both described as gorgeous and they're gorgeous on the covers and she's like wearing this like beautiful dress that I love looking at.

JEN: Yeah

VANESSA: And so I feel like it ticks all the boxes of like being a romance cover, he's like lifting her in the air and they're smiling at each other, but they also look like how they're described, um, which I feel like yeah is rare.

JEN: Alyssa Cole's covers are amazing. Like whoever is doing that artwork, I think it's just astounding. I'll tell you a book cover I saw today on Twitter is called Thief by B. Love. And it is probably the most strikingly beautiful cover I have ever seen.

And it's a, um, it's, it's, uh, a dark skinned black woman, but then it's like there's iridescent paint on her that's kind of blue and purple and like a magenta color. And that's the colors of like the title and the author's name and it is gorgeous. And I'm like, I'm going to buy this book. Right. I'm gonna judge this book by its cover.

**[MUSIC]**

VANESSA: So the question is like, who buys these books because of the covers, right? Like someone in marketing has decided that the best way to sell these books is to put these covers on them.

JEN: I think marketing is probably a really powerful force and we like think it doesn't work on us but it must.

VANESSA: Mhmm

JEN: One of my favorite things about buying historicals in paper is like the step back which is okay, so what that is is like when you just look at the cover, it's a beautiful woman, right, in her beautiful gown, but when you often when you open it up for some authors then there's like the picture of the couple like do you know what I'm talking about?

VANESSA: Mhmm. It's just sort of A glossy second page that's a little bit thicker than a book page but not as thick as a cover.

JEN: That's called the step back. And I've got to say, I will absolutely buy books in paper to see like for that, right? Like I mean talking about like Sarah's books like I like seriously and legitimately spend a lot of quality time looking at the placement of his hand on her in like the wicked and the wallflower step back. As like, that's sexy as hell.

VANESSA: So it's, it's all this like wish fulfillment, right? It's like, The cover is some sort of promise and then the step back is like, let me show you some of the happily ever after.

JEN: Oh, ab-- I think so.

VANESSA: Right

JEN: But I also think like if, if that's the case, then I think it's even why it's like more urgent that everybody get to see themselves that way.

VANESSA: Yeah.

JEN: Like that's the part I just wish like, okay, so if that's the case, if we're going to admit that's true, it's that wish fulfillment. Like if I had a gown like that and a man gazing at me like that or or, right, that, like everybody then deserves to have like people on the cover that like look like them. I mean, that's the part I think I really wish for a lot. If you read a romance, right, I think it's because there's a feeling that like we deserve, we deserve love, we deserve to feel this way. And a, a, the cover at some level is sort of a promise of that. And and that's why I think, you know, if it's a cover with like a set of beach chairs and a couple glasses of wine and a pair of flip flops, I think that's signaling a kind of happiness. Right. I mean, so there's so many different levels of like what those promises, like what book covers are communicating, right? So it's like you'll have a peaceful like time, you will have a gorgeous face and dress, you will have someone, gazing at you, you will have like someone gripping your thigh, right? Like it's kind of

VANESSA: Right

JEN: all tied up into like kind of what romance promises, which is you will be adored.

**[MUSIC]**

VANESSA: Jen, before we let you go, I'd like to ask you about this Reddit question that we found that we think gets to some of the things that we've been talking about with romance covers. So bear with me as I read this to you. I met my girlfriend at work 18 months ago. She worked as an intern...and I need to stop Instagram stalking her, but I don't know how. Thoughts?

JEN: Okay. I want to talk actually about this jealousy thing first because I think jealousy is something that happens a lot in romance novels. In a romance novel I love it cause it's just this like sign of their like real deep, you know all these feelings. But it's also because often in the books the like heroes who feel this way are not very good about talking about their feelings. Right? And so like jealousy is just like every feeling they have. Like that's one they're allowed to say, men are allowed to say I feel jealous or whatever. So the thing that I keep, I kept thinking about as you read that question is that he needs to talk to her. [laughs] Right? Like you feel the way you feel because you have all these questions and you're trying to work through them all on your own without talking to your girlfriend and he's never going to get any sort of like resolution to this. You know what I mean? Without communicating with his girlfriend, his concerns that like, do you really like, do you like me for me? And if you don't like me for me, is this why you like

this other guy B? Right. Cause he's more handsome or more dynamic or whatever.

VANESSA: I think that that's almost always the right advice, right? Is like don't talk to strangers on Reddit. Talk to the person.

JEN: Yes. [laughs] Right! The other thing I would like, I would really want to say, and this is something like I've said to my son and I've said to my students is, the thing that's amazing about love is when you're in love with someone, they're beautiful to you. It doesn't matter if they're perfectly beautiful. I mean God, if that was the case, no one would ever get together with anybody else except like supermodels. But you know, lots and lots of people in the world have friendships and romantic entanglements with other humans who are not perfectly attractive. Right? We start at some point to judge each other for like our-- I mean, I know it's like sounds corny, but I believe it like our inner beauty, right? Like the friends I've chosen to be with the people I hang out with, I don't hang out with them because they're pretty I hang out with them because I like their brains. I like the way they think. I like the way they see the world. I like their passion for like making the world a better place. Like how they actually look stops mattering to me and I feel like it makes me sad. Right? Like if you've been with someone for, I don't know, like 18 months or whatever he says, you know, and he still feels this, you know, that she's judging him. I would like to dig into that. Like uh is there some reason for that or is that just like his own, you know, his own problem. I mean, I'm not a beautiful person, but I'm pretty sure I'm beautiful to my husband, you know, I mean, and that, that's because he loves me and I love him. It's not because of our actual looks and I, I really would feel sad to be in a relationship that made me feel that way all the time. And I know I'm lucky to say that I know there are a lot of people who really do feel, [sigh] you know, I don't know like the pressure to look a certain way either for their partner or their job or whatever like that's real. But in my home I don't want to feel that way.

VANESSA: Yeah. And I do think it, he goes at least a pretty long way to say like, she isn't doing anything to make me feel this way other than liking these Instagram posts. And so it does sound like it's insecurity on his part and that

JEN: Yeah

VANESSA: Yeah. That she does love him and like that her dream guy isn't the guy that she actually wants to be with in the real world.

JEN: Right. Yeah.

VANESSA: It's like she might really just enjoy fantasizing about this other guy, but she doesn't want to be with him. She wants to be with her boyfriend.

JEN: Yeah, I think-- Well, and I mean, and that's the part I think about this letter that I do feel like sometimes when our relationships with other people, right, not just our romantic relationships, our friendships, parenting, dealing with our own parents, you know, people at our job, it really brings up like really deep seated and deep rooted issues about how we see ourselves in the world. And this is what I love about romance. Like in a romance, everyone's internal and interior lives, every, everyone's emotional life is valuable and worthwhile. And I feel like that's like what I love about romance. And so I feel often sad when I meet people who really struggle to talk about how they feel inside because having like a rich inner emotional life that I feel in contact with, I think makes me a better person in the world.

VANESSA: I mean, I obviously believe that reading romance makes me a better person in the world.

JEN: [laughs]

VANESSA: um, So I, I'm like preaching to the converted here.

JEN: I know. So, you know, we're talking about like covers and like what sells and basically what our writer is asking is like, I think she wants me for me, but what if she wishes there were like a different cover on me? Right. And like I really feel like what I'm saying to him is like the cover doesn't matter as long as what's inside is what, what counts. Right? I mean, you know, like God, there's a reason we say you can't judge a book by its cover. Right? I have read and loved books with illustrated covers. I have read and love books with clench covers. I have read and loved books with bare naked man chests on them. It doesn't really matter. It's what's inside that matters. Right? And that I think is like the real, the, the whole big idea about everything in romance, right, is like, we all deserve these stories if we want them. And everyone in a relationship deserves to find someone who cares about who they are on the inside, not just how they look on the outside.

VANESSA: Yeah.

**[MUSIC]**

VANESSA: Well Jen, thank you so much for solving this person's love life for him and for taking the time to speak to us and yeah, and for being a like brilliant voice in the world of romance.

JEN: Okay, great. No problem. Thanks you guys.

**[MUSIC]**

VANESSA: I felt like Jen and I couldn't quite figure out how to feel about illustrated covers. And then I talked to Nichole Perkins and she said this brilliant thing, so I wanted to make sure to share that with you also. Here's Nichole Perkins.

VANESSA: I love like the Jasmine Guillory, Helen Hwang covers, but I, I, I also am really excited for there to sort of be a backlash and have the really raunchy covers again and just have women shamelessly reading really raunchy covers on the subway. And I do think that that, I, I hope that that's where cover art goes in five years and I'm optimistic that it will.

NICHOLE: I think that that's what's happening because I have seen some people doing a little push back on the covers, particularly um, romance novels that feature, uh, interracial couples

VANESSA: Right

NICHOLE: That, that seem to have gone towards the, um, computer illustrated covers more often, or, or, in such a way that if it's a woman of color in the, you know, that's the heroine, her features are not pronounced, they're just kind of sketched in or the features do not really represent that she's a woman of color. It's just the fact that, you know, she's tan or something or has a darker skin tone or something like that. So I have been seeing a little bit of pushback about that. But I think as we continue to evolve in the romance industry that there will be more realistic covers. People like, um, authors like Beverly Jenkins and Alyssa Cole, they tend to have real life models on their covers. Sometimes Alyssa Cole's works, um, just have a cover of a single person, like the main uh character in the novel. And then other times sh-- it's the couple and they are embracing, um so Maybe as her work continues to grow in popularity, more people will, you know, more publishing companies will see that it's okay to have the real life couples clutched in an embrace and kissing and holding each other and being real. I think it's interesting that we want to use romance novels as kind of a roadmap to the way relationships could be, but the covers don't want to reflect that.

VANESSA: Yeah, I had never thought about the fact that of course, um, well first of all, I love Alyssa Cole's and, and Beverly Jenkins's covers, but also I'd never thought about the fact that as romance is becoming more diverse, um, and it is authors like



Jasmine Guillory and Helen Hwang two authors of color that, um, the animated covers have become more popular and it's like a way of white washing those, you know, interracial or, um, more minority represented characters. And that is such an interesting and upsetting way to try to like manage that transition to hopefully more and more writers of color being appropriately represented by major publishing houses.

NICHOLE: Yeah, it's a little, um, like once you start to see it, once you realize it, it does become a little upsetting. And it's like,

VANESSA: Yeah,

NICHOLE: You're trying to trick me, ha, a little bit, but uh, you know, but then you get caught in that idea of, of wanting to support the author and wanting to read a, a good book and also, you know, wanting to call out this tactic, you know, of what they're doing.

VANESSA: Yes. Nicole, thank you so, so much for taking the time to talk to us and just like bring all of your wisdom of romance novels to our podcast.

NICHOLE: Thank you for asking me. I love talking about romance novels. I could talk about them all day.

### **[MUSIC]**

VANESSA: So Julia, what did you think of what Jen and Nicole had to say about covers and how has it made you rethink this Reddit question?

JULIA: Well, I was thinking that perhaps our Reddit question wasn't an exact map back onto the idea of romance covers, but I'm not exactly sure why I'm feeling this dissonance between our advice and the advice that we would give to someone who is really loving covers and that's making their partner uncomfortable.

VANESSA: Right? It's a, yeah. I was thinking that same thing like I have, I have romance novels all over the house and if Peter was like, you can no longer have these covers in the house, they make me feel threatened. I'd be like, okay, calm down. This is my fantasy life. It has nothing to do with you. Whereas if I was liking every photo of some ex or something on social media, I think that that would be a more reasonable conversation. Maybe.

JULIA: And I think part of what you're touching on is that social media inherently is supposed to, is supposed to be related to reality in a way that romance novels are explicitly fantasy.

VANESSA: There is a problem here that is we can't separate the, that there's an objectifying gaze happening both on social media and and on romance covers.

JULIA: Yes

VANESSA: And therefore there is a moral aspect to what it is that what it is that we follow on social media and what it is that we put on our romance covers. Lindy West in her book *Shrill* talks about how the more you look at pictures of fat women, the more beautiful you find fat women to be. And that one of the problems is that like through advertising in the media, all we consume are women of a certain size. And that actually one of the best things that we can do for, you know, seeing different sized people as beautiful is to fill our Instagrams with different sized people. And I think that that for example is why people are responding so positively to Lizzo right? Like we get used to seeing different size bodies and people loving their different size bodies and it can actually rewire our brains. And so Nichole just really made me realize how problematic these animated covers are because the content of romance novels is changing. We are reading about totally different kinds of bodies than we were reading about even 10 years ago. And because we're now reading about black bodies or different sized bodies or LatinX bodies or you know, trans bodies, we're no longer seeing real life figures on the covers.

JULIA: Yeah. I wonder if there is some kind of Trojan horse strategy where they're like, look at this, look at this illustrated cover that seems kind of beautiful but perhaps bland and inside you get these really rich stories and so you're putting those books into the hands of people who may not have chosen them otherwise.

VANESSA: Yeah, I think it's probably a really wise marketing strategy. It just makes me sad. So I guess the thing that I would say differently than I said last time we addressed this question is that yeah, I don't think it means anything for your relationship that your girlfriend is looking at these photos. But I do think what we look at matters.

JULIA: Mhmm

VANESSA: And so I think it's worth talking to her about, which, you know, we've always said, but like what we do look at matters. And I think it is fair to say it bothers me that you're always looking at this kind of person who I will never look like. And then it's also fair for her to respond being like, it's just my fantasy life. Right? Like, but there needs to be a conversation there.

JULIA: Yeah. I think it's really smart to put a name to why he might be feeling uncomfortable with it as this being a structural issue more so than a personal issue because then it might seem like it's not coming from a place of like of jealousy but rather a place of, I'm acknowledging that we're both part of this social media machine that affects our relationship in material and serious ways.

VANESSA: Yeah, it's so frightening. But of course like who we follow on social media does impact our relationships, right? If you're like seeing all of your friends getting engaged on social media, you will feel more of a pressure to get engaged and that doesn't make us dumb or like easily manipulated or it just makes us human. Like what we look at becomes normalized for us.

JULIA: So are you telling me I should stop looking at moms of five on Instagram?

VANESSA: No, I think you will be a great mom of five.

JULIA: [laughs] Thank you.

VANESSA: So Julia, do you still want to call this episode, Delete Your Social Media except for puppies?

JULIA: Absolutely. And mom's of five.

VANESSA: I want to change it to curate your social media with intention and mindfulness. That's what I want to call it.

JULIA: I feel like you're just sending them to Goop.

VANESSA: [laughs] I want to retitle it, Go to Goop. Julia, I haven't seen this week's episode of great British bake off yet. Do you want to come watch it with me?

JULIA: I've already watched it. I've watched it without you

VANESSA: Ah, traitor! Fine. I'm going to go watch it without you then

JULIA: You should text me what you think.

VANESSA: I hope they decide to kick no one off

JULIA: That as a spoiler does not happen. Someone leaves. Okay. Bye.

VANESSA: This has been delete your social media except for puppies and moms of five, an episode of Hot and Bothered. Go check out Jen at JenReadsRomance and on

her podcast Fated Mates and check out Nicole Perkins on The Waves and Thirst Aid Kit. Follow us on Twitter and Instagram at therompod and leave us a review on iTunes and please go support us on Patreon. We can't do this work without your support. This episode of Hot and Bothered was a co-production of Not Sorry Productions and Spoke Media. We're executive produced by me, Vanessa Zoltan and Ariana Nedelman and associate produced by Julia Argy and Chelsea Ursin. Our production team is Bridget Goggin, Hannah Goldbach, Janielle Kastner and Caroline Hamilton, Jenna Hannum, Will Short, Alexander Mark and Jonathan Villalobos. Our music is from FirstCom and by Nick Boll. Thank you so much and we'll talk to you next week.