

## HOT AND BOTHERED

### HOLIDAY BONUS: INTERVIEW WITH JASMINE GUILLORY

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**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:00:00] Hi, everyone, it's Vanessa. I'm really excited to share a special conversation that I got to have a couple of months ago now with the amazing author Jasmine Guillory, who I have read every single one of her romance novels. And Jasmine is a personal inspiration for me because I'm turning 40 in a few months and I still have not published my first romance novel. And Jasmine did not publish her first romance novel until she was forty-two. So I feel like I have two years to pull off becoming the next Jasmine Guillory. Big shoes, but a girl can dream.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:00:31] So you're going to hear Jasmine and I have a conversation about how she started writing romance novels, which, as you all know from season one of Hot and Bothered is a topic very close to my heart. And you'll hear us talk about her latest book *While We Were Dating*, which I hadn't read when I interviewed her, but I have of course since read, and it's fantastic. So I hope that you enjoy this conversation between me and the great Jasmine Guillory. Pick up any of her books as a post-holiday gift to yourself. And happy happy holidays! Happy New Year! I'm Vanessa Zoltan and this is a special episode of Hot and Bothered.

[00:01:09] [Theme music]

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:01:21] Well, Jasmine, thank you so much for joining us. I am a big fan. My first question is just... you became a romance writer - and my understanding is and please correct me if I'm wrong - by doing NaNoWriMo. You were working as a lawyer and you were like, I'm just going to do this fun thing. And you accidentally wrote *The Wedding Day*, an amazing romance novel. So please tell me about that experience.

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:01:45] Yeah. So I started writing late, relatively late. I think a lot of writers have this story. They started writing when they were seven years old, and that's not, you know, my journey to writing. I was a big reader my whole life, but I really only started writing after I had been a lawyer like 10 years or so. And so I had written one and a half books before that, but neither of them was romances. Both of them were sort of like young adult romance, but none of them was like a regular romance novel. And then I had taken a break from writing for a little while, and then I was reading a ton of romance and just having so much fun reading it. And so then at one point, I kind of had the idea for *The Wedding Date*, and I kind of jotted it down. Like with all of my books, I started everything with a note on my phone. So I sort of like have the idea and then kind of kept adding little things to it. But I hadn't really committed to myself that I was going to write it. And then a friend of mine texted me - so NaNoWriMo is the national novel writing month. November is their big month, but they also have months in April and in July that are sort of a little bit more low-key. And a friend of mine texted me like March 30 I think one year and said: "Me and another friend are going to do NaNo in April, you should do with us." And I sort of like thought about the note on my phone with this idea I had, and I was like, "OK." [laugh] And then I spent like a day and a half really kind of coming up with a sort of outline for the book. And then I just dove in. And so I wrote the the first 50 thousand words of *The Wedding Date* in that April. And then I kept going. I wasn't writing as fast after NaNo finished, but I kept going with it and finished the first draft of *The Wedding Date* in June sometime that year. And then spent a long time

revising it. And that's when I kind of started reaching out to agents, and that was the book that got me my publishing deal.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:03:44] I feel like that's the dream story for writers, right? It's like I just banged it out, you know, in some passionate fit. And then, of course, we hear the real story of like and then it took months of revisions.

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:03:58] [Laughter] Exactly.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:04:00] Why did you decide on romance as a genre? What do you love about the genre?

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:04:04] Yeah. So I had been reading a lot of romance over the past few years. Before that, I had gone through a really stressful time. I had kind of a medical crisis and reading romance was so soothing then. I think you go into it knowing that it's going to be a happy ending. And I think that people kind of scoff at that sometimes. But that's really what I needed. You know, I needed to start a book where I wasn't anxious while I was reading it. And yes, like difficult things happen in romance novels. Like people go through stressful times. There's a lot of ups and downs, but I needed to go into a book knowing that the end was going to make me happy. That if someone introduced a puppy in this book, nothing was going to happen to the puppy. Like, I think that's something you could know in romance, right? And so I was reading it for a while, and at first I was reading a lot of historical romance and I remember thinking, 'this is so fun, but I don't think I could write one of these.' And then I start reading contemporary romance, and I was like, 'oh, yeah, yeah, I want to do this.' And so I think that's kind of how it started, is I was just reading a lot of it, and it made me really realize that that's what I wanted to do. And once I started writing *The Wedding Date*, I was just having so much fun writing, like I couldn't wait to get home and write at night, and I was really consumed by the story. And I had that feeling like that feeling that you get when you can't wait to get home and keep reading your book, like, that's how I felt about writing it. And so that has really been what has kept me going for the past six or seven years as I have been writing and kind of on this publishing journey, is that fun that I have when working on a book.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:05:47] Yeah, I feel like romance as a genre that actually contains a lot of subversiveness within it, right? It tends to be a place that people think of as antiquated and anti-feminist, where it's actually like a place where quite radical feminism and anti-racism and like pro-gender fluidity can happen. And your books often take place in political worlds or deal with really political issues. And I'm wondering how you feel as though romance can actually serve for these like really radical, exciting purposes?

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:06:19] A core romance novels are about relationships, right, and I think that's what life is about. Yes, it's about big political moments, but it's also about the small relationships between people that really change lives. And so that can be reflected in so many ways in a story, whether it's in talking about race, which is something that I talk about in all my books because my books are about people of color, my books are about black women, and I don't think black women can go in relationships without talking about race. And it's not that it's like a big thing, but it's a small element that is something that comes up. I think people talk about body image and about mental health and about politics in the way that people do in real life. Like things that I talk about with my friends all the time are reflected in intimate relationships that we have with people and books about those. And so I think romance really can deal with that in a way that makes people

think but isn't a core of the story, because the core of the story is the relationship. But that plays a role in every relationship you have. You know, all those things.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:07:23] Right. So I am a Jasmine Guillory completist, except for your most recent book, *While We Were Dating*. But something that I have noticed and love about your books is the like flirtation with fame and power. In *Royal Holiday*, like you meet the Queen and in several of your other books, you meet the mayor of Berkeley, or at least are like in the office of the mayor of Berkeley. And in this one you have a full out movie star as one of the main characters. And that makes total sense to me as like escapist romance, but I would love to hear you talk about why you straddle that line in your plots. What, what purpose that serves.

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:08:04] I mean, kind of initially there's been a lot of plots around politics in my early books, and I think partly that was because I've worked in politics in my career. It was something that I thought about a lot. And I think that, kind of like, celebrity and fame is also something that I've thought about a lot just in the way that Americans think about celebrity and deal with celebrities, right? Because there's a whole separation, which, you know, there's the public side and the private side. I think there's kind of a constant criticism of celebrities, but also a constant like hunger for news about celebrities. And so it really makes me think about how do we treat celebrities, why are we constantly criticizing them, but also want to know all of the latest news? And what does that do to the people on the other side? What do they think about? How do they deal with it? And especially when it's a black women who get just a higher level of criticism in anything that we do. And so that was really something that I was really interested to explore in this book.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:09:08] Yeah. I mean, something that we talked about in our last season of *Hot and Bothered* was we were chasing the power dynamics within *Jane Eyre*. And I think that that is something that you explore a lot within your books. You have women with a lot of power and often with more traditional power than the men. And women who are sort of training men to respect that power, right? And are saying like 'no, actually, you have to treat me like this. I don't care that you're a senator. You still have to ask my permission before you do things.' And I'm wondering what you want women and maybe especially black women to be taking from your books about power, about their own power at core.

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:09:48] I want people to know that they are worthy of respect and love. I think those are the most important things for me. And I think it's hard to think about both at the same time, right? Because so many people think that, 'oh well, I can only get one' or 'well, he treats me fine. So do I love him? That doesn't matter.' And so I think it is important to really know your value and know that you have value. And that's something that constantly black women get beaten down through the media through the way we treat it in the world, through other people. And so my goal in my books is really to lift us up and to think about like, these are all the things that we can do. People don't treat us well, but that's OK. We can treat ourselves well.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:10:35] Yeah, and I think one of the things that I love so much about your books... What I hope for them is that they are training people to demand things that your characters demand, right? Because your character's needs get met. Like they demand things from their boyfriends and partners and the compromises are made and the men rise up to meet them. And I'm like, "Yes, that is what we all need in our lives, is to learn that we're allowed to ask for things." And that is the only way that people are going to give them, Right? Because people do not want to give up their power unless it's demanded.

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:11:11] Yeah, absolutely, and I think, you know, to think about like the respect that you can demand from other people and the respect that you can demand from yourself. I think that it's really hard sometimes to I mean, people talk about self-care a lot, right? But I think one of the most important things about self care is like... Thinking about yourself as a person worthy of care is one of the hardest things for all of us. And so sometimes it's like, 'you know, I don't deserve that nap because I didn't do enough work today' or like whatever. And I think we all really need to think we're worthy of taking care of ourselves, no matter how productive we were that day or what we did for other people... Like we ourselves are important. And I think that's one thing that I would love people to get out of my books.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:12:02] The other thing that I have to say that I love so much about your books is the really strong female relationships at the heart of your books and friendships in general. Some of them are across gender. But right, like you have a very strong mother/daughter relationship, you have friends who are there for each other in really radical ways. And my favorite love songs are friendship, love songs like two women who love each other and are there for each other and are wishing well for each other. And that is just always, always a central plot for you. And so I'm just wondering if you could expand on that, why you always have female friendships at the center of your romance novels?

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:12:39] Well, I mean, I think it's because female friendships are really at the center of my life, right? Like, I have so many really close friends who have been so important to me throughout my whole life. And I think those friendships have especially been important over the past year and a half when we have all been so disconnected from one another and have really needed that support that you get from friends. You know, I wrote this book, I wrote *While We Were Dating* during the pandemic, which there was a lot of difficulty in actually writing during the pandemic. But the book also brought me a lot of joy. Just writing it, I think, really helped me. But there was one moment where I wrote a scene where, like two friends who hadn't seen each other for a while, like had this long tearful hug. And after I finished it, I was like, "OK, I know what I was doing there." [Laughter] I wasn't really thinking about it as I was writing, but I was like "I guess I miss my friends."

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:13:32] Yeah.

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:13:32] You know that's something... I think the friendship stories in my books are all very personal. None of the people in my books are real people or based on real people, but the friendships and the way that they relate to one another absolutely are.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:13:49] Okay so I want to ask more about *While We Were Dating*, but just one last question before I ask you to really tell us about that book. Which is, do you have a favorite trope when you are picking up romance? Are you like, "OK, it's an enemies to lovers trope? Yes, please." Do you have one like that?

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:14:08] My absolute favorite is marriage of convenience. Two people have to get married for whatever reason, and then they fall in love. Love it. Love every single one. I read like hundreds of them. I can't get enough of them. They're the best.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:14:23] When are you going to write one?

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:14:25] Yes, it's a little harder to write a modern one of those, but I might have to find a way because I love them so much. [Laughter]

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:14:33] Jasmine, you have to find a way to write a contemporary marriage of convenience because it's one of my favorite tropes, too. And it would be so fun. Do it for me. Write me a whole book, please.

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:14:45] All right, I'll try. I'll come up with a way.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:14:48] What do you love about it? Why do you think that it's such a compelling genre? Right because it's like a woman's hell, right, to be like forced into marriage?

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:14:56] Absolutely, yes. I think partly I find it very soothing in many ways because another favorite kind of not quite genre, but situation that I know many people have, is the like 'stuck in the cabin and there's only one bed' kind of thing. And I feel like a marriage of convenience is kind of a broader version of that, right? Like, they're stuck in a house together and they have to, like, make their way with one another around all of that. And so like, they're having awkward conversations over the breakfast table or whatever. And I just sort of loved that, like beginning a relationship. They don't think it's going to work. And then somehow it does.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:15:37] OK, so tell me about *While We Were Dating*, it's on my bedside table, I'm so excited to read it. It's like *Win a Date with Tad Hamilton*, *Notting Hill*, right? Like, that's sort of the vibe, right?

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:15:48] Exactly. Yes, it's about Ben and Anna. Ben is an advertising executive, Anna is the Hollywood star that is in his most recent ad campaign. They are immediately attracted to one another. They know that they can't actually do anything about it, though, because they're working together. It's a short amount of time. They both have lots of other stuff going on. And then Ben kind of helps Anna out with a family emergency and then everything comes to a head and they have to sort of figure out what to do with their relationship.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:16:19] I'm so excited. I'm just so excited to read it. One of the things that I love so much about your books are the ways that they are intertwined. And so Ben is a character who we've met in a previous book as like sort of the Lothario brother. And so I'm wondering, even though you're bringing this character that we know before into another world, what is different about this book? What can we expect that's different from your previous books?

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:16:44] Yeah, you know, it's always fun to kind of revisit a character and see them through their own eyes as opposed to somebody else's.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:16:51] Yeah.

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:16:51] Ben is kind of the Lothario younger brother, but he is a whole character on his own. Like, that's not his whole personality. And so it was really fun to explore that and really think about who Ben was. And also, there's a whole there's a lot about mental health in this book. I think it was sort of partly accidentally, I think, because in *The Wedding Party*, the book that Ben was previously in, his brother at one point is kind of complaining about his younger brother and says you know, "My brother always talks about going to therapy. I think he just likes to go because we get to talk about himself." And I kind of realized that when I was writing like 'oh

no, I have that line in the book. I guess I have to think about why actually Ben went to therapy.' And so that was one thing that I really kind of had to think about and thought about as I wrote really who Ben was. And it is a little bit because he likes to hear himself talk. But it's not just that. And so really kind of thinking about that and why he is attracted to Anna and what kind of relationship they have was a lot of fun for me to deal with.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:17:52] Yeah. I love two things about that. One is that I love that you, like, wrote yourself into a corner and you're like, 'OK, that's what I got to do now.' That seems very marriage of convenience to me. Like, this seems like you are someone who feels free by constraints, you know, like, 'OK, I got to make this work.' And the other thing I love is, and this is something that I feel like you do and all of your books is that again, it's just like a little bit subversive, right? Like to talk about mental health in a romance. Or, you have in Royal Holiday, you have an older couple that's like so sexy and I love imagining like 50 year olds and 60 year olds like having romantic sex lives, right? And interracial relationships, and cross power relationships, and women who aren't size fours and like, these are just like things that shouldn't be subversive in any way in 2021. And you just do it and never treat it like it's a big deal to talk about these things.

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:18:50] Yeah, I mean, I think that those are the relationships that I see and experience in normal life. And so that's what I want to write about. You know, and that's what feels like right to me to write about.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:19:00] Absolutely. OK, so last question. If you could press one romance novel into everyone's hands in the world, what would it be?

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:19:11] That is a great question. I really love Helen Huang's books. I think the way that she writes about neurodiversity and romance and relationships is really so funny to read, and you learn so much and it feels so honest. And I think I would press all of her books into everyone's hands.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:19:33] Yeah, The Kiss Quotient – my friend Marisa, who recommended it to me, she was like, "You will never find 100 hundred pages of making out hotter in your life." And that was absolutely my experience of reading it.

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:19:45] Yes, I loved it.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:19:46] Well, thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us. Everybody, I have no doubt should go read While We Were Dating, but also I can personally recommend your entire catalog. Which also like, how freakin prolific are you?

[00:20:00] [Laughter]

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:20:02] I feel like, it's like a book a minute and thank you. Like, keep them, keep them coming.

**Jasmine Guillory** [00:20:07] Well, thank you so much and thank you so much for having me.

**Vanessa Zoltan** [00:20:13] You've been listening to Hot and Bothered. We are in between seasons right now, but we are gearing up to hopefully do a deep dive into Pride and Prejudice in March. So if you'd like to help get us there, please consider supporting us on Patreon at

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