

## HOT AND BOTHERED: ON EYRE

### Episode 1 - On Eyre: An Introduction

VANESSA: You have an idea of what kind of person likes *Jane Eyre*.

[intro music begins and play periodically throughout]

It's a woman. It's a white woman. It's a twee white woman. She likes tea, dried roses. She blushes easily. She dreams of his and hers embroidered bath towels. If she drinks coffee, it's spiced with pumpkins. I'm obviously here to tell you that you're wrong. I love *Jane Eyre* and I don't even like tea. Also, I think it's important to point out that there doesn't seem to be a stereotype of a kind of person who loves Dickens, and I know that you know this, but it has to be said for the record. Women who like potpourri and whose embarrassment pinks up their faces are wonderful, brilliant women. It's just that it's not JUST potpourri ladies who love *Jane Eyre*. It isn't one kind of person who loves *Jane Eyre*. Maya Angelou loved *Jane Eyre* and would reread it frequently. Zadie Smith loves *Jane Eyre* and she doesn't love *Wuthering Heights*, by the way. Stacey Abrams, Amanda Gorman, Jacqueline Wilson, Hilary Mantel, they all love *Jane Eyre*, and I don't know their feelings about potpourri, but my point is that serious people, not just victims of patriarchy, but its biggest enemies, love this book. The thing that most people get wrong when it comes to the *Jane Eyre* fandom isn't just who we are, but what it is that we love about it. Whether or not we are twee, or white, or women, you think we love it for its romance, and we do love its romance, but we also love its resistance. We love it for its obsession with injustice. We love it because it's angry.

*Jane Eyre* is perhaps THE foundational text about rage, injustice, class, and religion, and what it means to be alone, unseen, and unheard. The book somehow straddles the line of marginalized and canon. It's both seen as part of the stuffy white, male part of literature, and yet is also managed to be seen as silly, for young girls who don't know better than to fall in love with men like Rochester, but it was revolutionary for its time, and certainly isn't antiquated for today.

I loved *Jane Eyre* before I'd read it. My mom had been telling me about her favorite book my whole childhood. "Oh, that reminds me of *Jane Eyre*," she would say. I asked to be able to read it by the age of eight, but she told me that I wouldn't appreciate it until I was older, and it was decided that I would receive it at the same age she had read it for the first time, fourteen. I of course fell in love. *Jane Eyre* was fated to be my best earthly companion.

I am an atheist Jew, and I have a book coming out next week. [end intro music] It's called *Praying with Jane Eyre*. That is how much I love the novel *Jane Eyre*. I wrote a book about praying with it. I don't expect you to love *Jane Eyre* as much I as do. Maybe you do. Maybe you love it more, or better than I do. Maybe you've never read it before. Maybe you get *Jane Eyre* the novel and Jane Austen the writer confused. It's fair - same name and similar dresses. Not only do I not expect you to love this book, the fact that I love this book isn't even my motivation for doing this podcast. Because regardless of you well you know or like this book, here's what I think. I think that *Jane Eyre* has been key in forming you. I think *Jane Eyre* has been key in your understanding of romance, of piety, of hypocrisy, of being parentless, and of a lot more. That's because our whole culture around romance is a result of *Jane Eyre*. It was a blockbuster sensation, which influenced the next generation of romance, which influenced the next generation of romance after that. You don't get *Carrie* and *Mr. Big* from *Sex and the City* without *Jane Eyre*. So even if you haven't read it, you've read or seen its inheritors. You've eaten its fruits. Its DNA is in you. And that's why we're doing this podcast. What is this fruit that we are eating?

I love *Jane Eyre* and I believe it is an important novel, but I have this lingering question. This book was handed to me when I was fourteen, as it was handed to my mother when she was fourteen, as it was handed to millions of women at formative ages in their lives. I have a thirteen-year-old stepdaughter. Do I want to hand her this book in a year? Do we want this book to carry on informing us the way it has? First, it is so white, so even if we recognize that it is about rage and injustice, do we want this version of rage and injustice to be the key story that we pass on? And, at the end of the day, this is a book about an eighteen-year-old governess falling in love with her late-thirty-something-year-old boss and more to the point, it's about him falling in love with her.

This season of *Hot and Bothered*, we'll be doing more of discussing what we think is the genius of *Jane Eyre*. [transition music begins] We'll be considering whether its genius continues to justify its pride of place on our bookshelves and its continued influence on our culture and in our lives. I'm Vanessa Zoltan and this is season three of *Hot and Bothered: On Eyre*.

[transition music ends]

Today's episode of *On Eyre* is your introduction. We are gonna give you all of the information that you need in order to dive into this book and help us walk through it slowly, deliberately, feeling out its gift and its difficult moments. First I'm going to tell you about Charlotte Bronte. Charlotte was born the third of six children and trauma started accumulating around her early. She lost her mother when she was five years old, and by the time she was nine, she'd gone from being the third sibling to the eldest. Her father made a living as a minister and the thing about a living is that it stops when you die. The children lived in the parsonage house their father was given as part of his work, but they knew that when he died, they would be evicted. They did not know that he would outlive all of his children. The sisters worried that they would have to support themselves and as women, their options were to teach or to marry, or to be geniuses, which is what Amy March in the 2019 movie "Little Women" is also lamenting: her option to either be a wife or a genius. Here she is talking to the character Laurie.

[begin movie audio]

LAURIE: You have so much talent and energy -

AMY: Talent isn't genius, and no amount of energy can make it so. I want to be great or nothing and I will not be some commonplace dauber and I don't intend to try anymore.

[clattering noises] [Amy sighs]

LAURIE: What women are allowed into the club of geniuses, anyway?

AMY: The Brontes?

[end movie audio]

VANESSA: But it's important to know that Brontes were not always the Brontes. Charlotte was the only one who lived long enough to see any money from the writing that the sisters did, and that is because she was able to live to the ripe old age of thirty-eight. I am thirty-nine. [background music] Ann and Emily died knowing nothing of their legacy and with no answer for which women are allowed into the club of geniuses. There had been a time in which they hoped that the one boy of the family, Branwell, would be able to support them, but the truest Romantic of the family, he suffered incurable heartbreak and instead of finding a trade or a job, drank himself to death. The surviving girls, Charlotte, Emily, and Ann, tried to teach. [back-

ground music] They really tried. They hated it. Charlotte would complain that she couldn't wait for the day to be over so that she could just use her imagination again. Emily hated teaching so much she just stopped. Charlotte saw another way for herself and her sisters. They could try to make money writing. They had been writing stories their whole lives. They'd been left to their own devices as children while their father walked twenty miles in a day to minister to the members of his parish. Alone in the parsonage, they'd split into teams and they devised competing kingdoms and imagined elaborate stories of their battles. They obsessively wrote the tales into tiny, homemade books that are no bigger than my thumbprint. I've seen one. In order to read it, you need a magnifying glass.

The Bronte sisters published the first book that they wrote together as adults: a collective book of poetry. But this book did nothing much except help them pick their intentionally androgynous pseudonyms: Acton for Ann, Currer for Charlotte, and Ellis for Emily. Bell for Bronte. Then, Charlotte wrote *The Professor*, her first novel. I had the chance to talk about *The Professor* with Professor Elsie Michie.

ELSIE: I tell my students it rhymes with "bitchy" [laughter] and then they never forget it.

VANESSA: Yeah! [laughter] Professor Michie is a professor of English. She's also the Associate Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Louisiana State University. She had this great story about Charlotte.

ELSIE: So when her first novel, *The Professor*, was rejected - and I think this is hilarious - she kept sending it out to publishers, but she didn't put a new wrapping paper on it, so she just crossed out [laughter] the publisher that rejected her and put the name of the next publisher and sent it out. So there's a part of her that was, that was very aware of rejection.

VANESSA: But then Charlotte had to take her father for cataract surgery in Manchester.

ELSIE: And then that means he has to sit with - he has to be in a bed without moving his head at all. And so she's sitting beside him and she has this time and she begins to write like crazy. And it's interesting to me, if you read Charlotte's description of writing it and Williams', her publisher's, description of getting the manuscript, they're virtually identical. I mean, he gets the manuscript, he thinks it's gonna be nothing, right? I mean, here's an unknown manuscript, and he stay up all night reading it. He can't put it down. It's the same way for her with writing it. She can't put it down, and I think for most people, that quality, that like, is like, something going downhill, that - and it took readers by storm. If you read the reviews, it's pretty amazing that the first published novel of an unknown novelist got the kind of response it did.

VANESSA: Under her new name, Currer Bell, Charlotte wrote *Jane Eyre*. It was an overnight success. Ann wrote *Agnes Grey* which sold pretty well, and Emily wrote *Wuthering Heights* which was not well received, though of course gained a passionate audience in later years. But it was Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* that changed their lives and changed English language literature and was given to me on my fourteenth birthday. It was a psychological book about the interiority of a young woman with no wealth or beauty. Nothing like it had ever been read before. Queen Victoria stayed up until 11:30 - 11:30! - reading it. Virginia Woolf went on pilgrimage to Charlotte Bronte's house - the parsonage in Haworth, and then Sylvia Plath went on pilgrimage to it the next generation. The book that is one of the central texts of second-wave feminism chose a *Jane Eyre* metaphor for its title: *The Mad Woman in the Attic*. Here's rhymes-with-bitchy again.

ELSIE: 1980's is when feminist criticism really hits its stride, right? And the big book that does it is entitled *The Mad Woman in the Attic*. That was arguably the breakthrough book in, um,

feminist criticism and I was at Yale in graduate school at that time, where there were almost no women professors, and we were reading *Mad Woman in the Attic* in a women's reading group, right, and we all had to spent twenty five dollars for it, which seemed hugely expensive back then, but it was magic, right, and - but it was the crossover book. By the time I got out of graduate school, people were teaching it in graduate classes. So I think before then, you had feminist criticism that was mostly read primarily by feminists, and *Mad Woman in the Attic* sort of claimed this territory, like everybody needs to be thinking about the Brontes, Shelley, um, Austen, Emily Dickinson, and everybody needs to be thinking about, you know, angels and demons, and how are women represented in novels. So I would say *Jane Eyre* became sort of the poster child for feminist criticism.

VANESSA: But it didn't end then. If you've seen *Gilmore Girls*, or *Ten Things I Hate About You*, then you've heard Rory Gilmore and Kat Stratford laud the genius of Charlotte Bronte.[background music] *The Life of Gemma Harding*, *The Woman Upstairs*, *Re-Jane*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, all retellings of *Jane Eyre*. There are *Jane Eyre* operas, ballets, art, removable tattoos. *Jane Eyre* is ubiquitous and it's a work of genius, but should it continue to occupy such a central place for us? Or is it time to sideline *Jane Eyre*?

I cannot possibly be trusted to think this through credibly. I'm too biased. I love the book too much. So I turn to one of the smartest women I know, Lauren Sandler, to insert just a little ambivalence. In another life, maybe Lauren would be an English professor. That would be the life where she'd followed her English degree from Barnard, and her Victorian literature studies in London to their logical conclusion. Instead, Lauren is an author and a journalist. She mainly writes about women and inequality. Her most recent book, *This is All I've Got*, is a narrative about a young woman alone in a cruel system, searching for love and connection, and most of all, for independence. A young woman, like *Jane Eyre*. *Jane Eyre* is not Lauren's favorite heroine and *Jane Eyre* is not Lauren's favorite book. Hi Lauren.

LAUREN: Hi Vanessa.

VANESSA: More from her next episode, in which we will be reading chapter one. Each week on *On Eyre*, we will be reading between one and three chapters of the book. As we discuss what we read that week, we will pay special attention to two things: where is the power, and where is the desire? And we'll use those questions to guide us through the book's gifts and its pitfalls.

Nicole Perkins is the author of the forthcoming book *Sometimes I Trip on How Happy We Could Be*. She's also someone who has spent her whole career thinking about women's desire. We asked her why it was so important to focus on that throughout this season.

NICOLE: I spend so much time focusing on women's desire, because I do think it is a way for women to get their power back. We lose so much power and control in our lives, you know, from the time that we are - start to walk, you know, we have to become aware of our bodies. Sit with your legs closed. Don't run around too much. Don't bring too much attention to yourself. But also, make sure that when someone looks at you, that you look this way, and not that way, you know, that kind of thing. And so, it's always about making sure other people feel comfortable with you, and there's so little focus on being comfortable with yourself.

I think taking back control of your own desire is one of the first steps in breaking down the barriers into true autonomy, true independence and freedom and, and choice.

VANESSA: I mean it's wild, right? Did *Jane Eyre* teach me how to desire? Or is it part of what has always taught me to behave? Is it a story of resistance? Or a story of submission? We'll

follow the power and the desire and see where it takes us. We'll start next week with chapter one in the next episode of *On Eyre*.

[exit music]

VANESSA: You've been listening to *On Eyre*. We're a small show so we need your support to run. If you can, please consider supporting us on Patreon at [patreon.com/hotandbotheredrom-pod](https://patreon.com/hotandbotheredrom-pod). If you love the show, please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. We are a Not Sorry production. Our executive produce is Ariana Nedelman. Our associate producer is Molly Baxter. And we are distributed by ACAST. We'd like to thank Elsie Michie rhymes-with-bitchy and Nicole Perkins for talking to us this week. And of course, Julia Argy, Nicki Zoltan, Stephanie Paulsell, and all of our patrons.

[end music]