

HOT AND BOTHERED

BONUS EPISODE: WHAT WE LOVE ABOUT WOMEN'S LIBERATION WITH LAUREN SANDLER

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VANESSA: Hi everybody! I hope that you're in the middle of falling in love with Jane Eyre, and if you are then might I recommend joining me on a Jane Eyre pilgrimage! We're going to go to Howarth and the West Yorkshire Moors where Charlotte Brontë and her sisters walked. We are going to see the plaque and the pub where Charlotte started writing Jane Eyre, the first words were written in a restaurant where we will have lunch! It is going to be a nerd's paradise. It is gonna be chilly, it will be January of 2022 and registration is open now. You can go to readingandwalkingwith.com to learn more. We hope that you join us. Space is super limited, but I hope to see many On Eyre listeners on the trip. That's readingandwalkingwith.com

[theme music begins]

VANESSA: This week, we don't just have the pleasure of talking to an author that I love. We also have the pleasure of introducing you to the cohost of On Eyre: Lauren Sandler. Lauren has already actually been introduced to you. We included her in season one of Hot and Bothered as an interviewee, but now we've lured her in to being a cohost of an entire season with us. What you're about to hear is an interview that I did with Lauren about her latest book: This Is All I Got. It is an incredible book that is now out in paperback about a young mother who's homeless, fighting for her life and for her son's. I'm Vanessa Zoltan and this is Hot and Bothered.

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V: So, I'm so excited to bring you all Lauren Sandler. For those of you who don't know her, it feels like a gift that I am giving you because Lauren has been a really important writer in my life for a long time and in fact, I read Lauren's book One and Only about ten years ago and Lauren, I don't know if you know this explicitly, but you get the credit for ending my first engagement.

LAUREN: [laughing] What?? Wait. You tell me this now? [still laughing]

V: Yes.

L: With a live mic, with listeners. Now I get the credit for ending your engagement. [laughing]

V: Yeah, so I always wanted one kid and he always was like "That's child abuse! We need to have two kids." And I read your book One and Only and I was like "here is a brilliant feminist researcher who can tell you exactly why one child is not child abuse and it's actually fine." And it gave me the courage of my conviction that like only wanting one child was a fair thing to want. And we broke up over it, essentially. So you – you are credited with my whole life now. Thank you.

L: It feels like a badge of shame, actually, when you put it that way, but I will take it. I will consider it to be that I was instrumental in your liberation. Shall we put it that way? [laughing]

V: Yes! Yes! I now have these two stepdaughters who are like the loves of my life who I would not have without you.

L: Thank you. [both laughing]

V: I do feel like you – that is what you obsess over is women’s liberation, right? Like I know that you’ve had a lot of different beats over your career, but to me that seems to be the current phase of your obsession with fighting for women across privilege spectrums.

L: Yeah it’s actually funny to me that One and Only is the book that was liberating for you because you know my first book was about the young Christian right, with you know –

V: Totally.

L: --a bit of my women’s lib obsession involved in that, which feels like such a Vanessa book, and then my most recent book This Is All I Got is a narrative about a young homeless mother in Brooklyn and her attempts to try to find stability in such a racist and inhospitable system which also feels to me like classic Vanessa territory. So, I love that out of my books it is One and Only that got you to end an engagement.

V: To be clear, I love all three of your books. [Lauren laughs] Right, like your obsession with religion, right like I grew up with Orthodox Jewish women all around me and it drove me absolutely up the wall all the time to see the lives that I could imagine for them, and then again, absolutely This Is All I Got is something that I care so passionately about is right, like housing for women, and housing for everybody of course, but -- I don’t know it felt like this really intimate way to meet you and become obsessed with you. [Lauren laughs] And so I just wanna be honest about the fact that this is how we met. Was about you helping like -- you know an upper middle class white lady, like find her own liberation when I know you’re fighting for everybody else also.

L: Thank you my dear. It’s funny cuz when I met you, it was when you invited me to be a guest on Hot and Bothered to talk about Evangelical romance novelists. And here I am now, cohosting Hot and Bothered podcast with you, having admitted on this very show that the only romance novels I have ever read are Christian romance novels, so sayeth the secular atheist feminist Jew. [both laughing]

V: Well and Jane Eyre is totally a religious romance novel, so that works.

L: I’m glad I’m like, keeping it on trend here.

V: Can you tell us a little bit about your book This Is All I Got?

L: I can. It’s funny, I feel like it’s the book that I became a journalist twenty years ago to write. One of my own obsessions were immersion reporting narratives like There Are No Children Here by Alex Alex Kotlowitz, and later on Random Family by Adrian LeBlanc. I mean there’s a long history -- although a small one -- a limited canon -- these deeply immersive narratives, books that can read like novels but in which every word is true. So that we can experience a way of living in America that we never get to otherwise. The book, I wrote to really feel like one of those nonfiction novels. It begins with my protagonist Camilla, who’s this extraordinary woman, going into labor in her shelter. And by the end of the book, she’s looking back at that time as the good old days. I did not know when I started telling her story how much worse it could get. Part of why she was such an interesting protagonist to me is, she’s this really extraordinary woman. She was a criminal justice student, she’s gorgeous and poised and has this brilliant lawyer’s mind. But of course, you know, was born into poverty, was born into intergenerational poverty that gets worse and worse with every generation, uh, in America and in a city like New York especially. And I wanted to see if she could make it work. I wanted to see if she could make it out of what she would always call The Cycle. Because there was no one else I had met who seemed as well equipped. I felt like if she couldn’t do it, then I couldn’t imagine who could. And so I wanted to find

out what would happen. And of course, I completely fell for her along the way. But I – I just really wanted to write a book that would shake readers by the lapels and get them to see and feel something that it's really easy to ignore if you have some privilege. I also wanted to write a book that was, like a real page turner, you know, that –

V: Yeah.

L: --I mean people are always joking like "oh yeah what a beach read!" But I actually really did wanna see people in bikinis reading this [laughing] book at the beach. Cuz I feel like a book like this feels like a homework assignment unless it's gonna be incredibly compelling and so I wanted to write something propulsive which is hard to do when you're writing about poverty, because poverty, for anyone who's experienced it can tell you, is really boring. It's days –

V: Yeah.

L: --in waiting rooms, it's days on subway tracks, it's a tremendous amount of loneliness and stagnation. So, to figure out how to like, get the tick-tock in that book so it would move. That was part of what I really endeavored to do. And I – I must say I'm proud of it and I hope that people will read it and talk about it and convene book clubs and bring it to the beach.

V: I mean, it's exceptional. It really is. I mean I was – I was gonna ask you a question about the boredom because that is, I would say, one of the things that I took away from the book was how dehumanizing it is to be asked to be so bored all the time, right?

L: Mhmm.

V: To sit in a waiting room that you know a chair is covered in urine and to have to make these micro-decisions about, do I go to the bathroom to clean up and risk losing my place in line? And have someone like Camilla's brilliance reduced to that. And yet it's such a feat of writing to write about boredom as if it's like a ticking bomb. Because what you feel is Camilla's frustration and you watch her – I mean like mostly you watch her keep her cool, and just be able to hold it together and find moments of humanity. And then of course have moments of incredible degradation. But how do you write about boredom as if it's like a Hitchcockian bomb in a suitcase?

L: I would say that the flip side to the boredom is that the pressure is constant.

V: Yes.

L: Especially if you're a single mother with a baby—

V: Right.

L: --like Camilla is in the book. I mean--

V: Right. I mean she's like fifteen minutes late to pick up the baby and it costs her thirty-five dollars—

L: Yeah.

V: At one point.

L: I think that the element of having this baby that needs to be nursed and dropped off and picked up and brought to doctors' appointments and frankly housed and fed, it's constant. And then there are the regulations of this system: if you don't have a job or you can prove that you're in school full time, three

months after you have that baby, then you don't get your welfare check. And if you don't get back to the shelter by curfew then you risk eviction. And you know, all of these different appointments, one after the other, you can never be late for them and then you wait in a waiting room all day just to be called back again just to be navigating missing class or being late for work or being late to the daycare like – that ticking time bomb element is a part of every single second of life. And yet you're sitting in this waiting room. And there is something that feels so dystopian about that. Obviously the whole system that I described is incredibly dystopian, and yet it is very much our reality. But there is something about the theater of that, the machine of that, which is forcing people to stay still as their lives are being forced out of control all the time. A tension in there that, being by Camilla's side, I experienced it viscerally with her all the time. And so, I think that it became internalized for me as well and became a part of that writing.

V: I would just love to hear a little bit about the reporting of this book. What was it like to just literally sit next to someone for over a year? And to have your life be determined by them? I would imagine that that is not usually how you live your life.

L: You know, we had a real closeness, and the way that I reported this book was really never to interview her about anything. I probably asked her a handful of direct questions in all of the time that I spent with her because we would just hang. It was just the hang. And the hang would sometimes be in a room at the shelter, or on the subway, or in a waiting room. But there was always just [pause] a hang. And in terms of what it meant to have my life determined by her schedule, yeah that was – that was a lot. There was a lot of like I would get a text at three o'clock in the morning and that would determine where I was gonna be at seven. And luckily, I had a really supportive partner and a really understanding child, both of whom also became very intimately involved in her life.

V: Right.

L: And you know, and I think that that was a great thing. That is another boundary that I imagine a lot of people think that I may have crossed, but -- it's interesting, there was a book by a sociologist in the sixties named Carol Stack called *All Our Kin*, and she's not a journalist. She's someone who was doing a sociological study about single motherhood. And her way of immersing herself was to say "Okay, I'm caring for your baby, you're caring for my baby." Her approach was, if you're gonna be intimate with me, I'm gonna be intimate with you. And that is often how I approach my own journalism, just like I do the rest of my life.

V: Have you gotten a lot of pushback about boundary-crossing and stuff? Because to me, like -- I'm a chaplain right, we spend a lot of time talking about managing boundaries, and anyone who's done this kind of work knows that boundaries are necessarily porous. That, sure, in a perfect world these things are clinical, and yet, if you are in my case like meeting someone for chaplaincy in an emergency situation for them, while you are simultaneously in an emergency situation. Right, like you're gonna Zoom from a weird place and they're gonna see your living room, right? Like these boundaries cannot possibly be maintained all the time. And so, I'm just curious if this is something that – I hate anyone who told you you did it wrong. Who told you you did it wrong?

L: [laughing] Well, I don't know if anyone shamed me that directly. I think that it's-- for journalism, it's really interesting because I've gotten pushback on both sides. So, I've gotten pushback from people who are not journalists who are furious that I did not pay her rent, that I did not give her a place to live. Which, you know, it's interesting, my mother-in-law has spent a lot of time in the social services world, and she pointed out to me: it's funny we never ask a social worker –

V: Right.

L: --why didn't you give this person a home? We never ask a nurse: why didn't you, you know, give your own blood. And yet there's something about journalism that sort of invites [pause] I don't know, an accusation of some complicity in the system that you're trying to expose. But on the other hand, I'm thinking about this conversation I had with Rebecca Skloot, who wrote *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, and she's a friend of mine. And Rebecca and I were sitting, I remember this, like on a couch after I'd been agonizing over a scene all day, and in this scene, I mention that I had bought Camilla's baby Alonzo a snowsuit because I did not want him freezing to death on my watch. And I remember Rebecca saying "You can't do that. The whole point is to not do that. So when I was, you know, writing *Henrietta Lacks*, when I was reporting that book, I needed to see how far someone would get to get a car payment. I didn't give them the car payment." And I remember saying "Rebecca, every day of Camilla's life, every second that I spend with her, is her trying to get the car payment." You know?

V: Mhmm.

L: And so, what is that line? And we had this big debate about it. It's a similar debate to one that I've had with journalists before and since about how I report in general, and especially how I report this book. And so, I own it through the whole book, I flag you know –

V: Yeah.

L: When I'm paying for lunch, and I flag what I'm participating in that other people might not be. And I also talk about my sleepless nights, about what does it mean to not ask her to move into my house? And where's the hypocrisy in that? And was it truly that I was needing to see what would play out for her, and therefore not interrupt that narrative? Cuz that's the purpose for that boundary. Or was it really that I couldn't deal with the stress of her and her baby moving into my apartment in Brooklyn? And I wrestled with that a lot. And I think it's both. It's not as simple as me being able to hide behind a professional curtain there. And say, "Oh no no, I can't."

V: Yeah. That honesty that you just like demonstrated there, and the exposure of your own hypocrisy but really everyone's hypocrisy in like functioning in this world, is part of the brilliance of this book, is that it just doesn't turn away from any of the nuance, or the like friction of your relationship with her, or of anything that she is going through. [pause] Lauren, something else that I'm curious about is I feel like the thesis of the book is in this quote from your book: "If Camilla couldn't use her wits and persistence to make the system work for her, no one could." And I feel like that is -- right like, that's the thesis of the book. Is like: let's see, the system is supposed to work. You're supposed to be able to walk through it and come out having achieved the American Dream. You're supposed to start in poverty and walk out and have a kid who's been fed while you go to community college and work your way up through college and get a job and an apartment and get married and have babies and everyone is happy. And so like, let's – let's give the system its best possible chance of succeeding. We are going to give it this exceptional young woman with a mind like a knife, and let's see what she does. And I'm wondering – I'm wondering your choice of that, right? Cuz it's taking an exceptional person, she is brighter and has more persistence than I do by a long shot, and that becomes very clear very quickly. So, I'm wondering your choice, rather than choosing someone more, maybe like prototypical, versus choosing Camilla.

L: Well, I think that there are two ways to answer this question. One way is that [pause] I think that there's a different book that I [pause] would have written, and perhaps imagined writing about someone who was more demographically aligned with a more common experience of homelessness. Someone who was African American instead of Latina. Someone who has debilitating mental health issues instead of someone who is really effective on a day-to-day basis. Someone who may have a history of drug use in

their family. I mean there are all of these different elements that would have given us a more [pause] representative story about how incredibly inhumane our tax-funded system is. This system that only exists to help people. And in fact, I believe, hurts people radically, the way that it is structured. So that book is a book that I would have written, I think, if there had been someone who was so demographically representative who had chosen me. So, I started reporting in this shelter, and there were a number of women who for very good reason did not want to participate in the experiment of this book. There were a number of women who did want to participate but who didn't have the hunger for my presence that Camilla did. And it was Camilla's hunger for my presence that allowed me to write the book that I was able to write. One that -- that can be so closely observed on a minute-to-minute basis, one that can delve so fully into her trauma, her past, her desires. It was her lack of boundaries with me that allowed me to write a book like this. And so, on the one hand, that offered up, I thought, a really effective experiment: if not her, then who can make it in this system? But that's all hindsight, really.

V: Mhmm.

L: Cuz she just was the one -- she's the one I was hanging with, more than anyone. And it's interesting, the book was originally something that I was going to fully focus at the shelter. My -- my initial editor, who acquired it, edited *Orange Is the New Black*, and that notion of sort of an ensemble story in a very specific place was one that really appealed to her, and to me as well. But, here's a little bit of a spoiler, at a certain point, Camilla gets kicked out of the shelter. And at that moment I had to decide: is this book about her, within an ensemble, or is this book going to follow her as an individual? Because she was either going to leave, and I would stay in the shelter, or I would have to follow her to her overcrowded apartment in the Bronx, and so on and so on. And she was just too compelling not -- not to stay with in that way. But that -- that changed the shape of the book, and what sort of story I could tell.

V: So Lauren, I met you and heard about your book from you before I read it. It wasn't out yet. And you told me that you sort of had a vision of almost making it *Mrs Dalloway*, that instead of one day you wanted it to be one year. And I was so excited, and you sent me an advance copy and I read it, and I was like "Ohmygod! It is! It's *Mrs Dalloway*!" But now, in this conversation with you, I'm like "No, it's *Jane Eyre*!" It is you following -- not that it can't be both -- but it is -- it is you following a young woman who is kicked out of her childhood home too young, right? Camilla, if I remember correctly, is kicked out of her mother's house at fifteen. Jane obviously at ten. And then is like sent out into systems that keep disappointing her, and like she keeps trying to find a way to survive. So, I'm wondering if that comparison resonates with you? Or you're like "No no, Camilla is not *Jane Eyre*. Stop it. *Jane Eyre* is a white lady in England. Different."

L: So, I, um, and I'm sure that we'll talk about this on the podcast, but I have -- I have read *Jane Eyre* now five times during five very different eras of my life, and I hadn't read *Jane Eyre* as I was reporting this book or writing it, until I began reading it very recently to think about it for this podcast. And I was knocked out by how uncanny the parallels are. When I was thinking about *Mrs Dalloway*, it was sort of a formal structure.

V: Right.

L: I mean obviously it's not like Camilla said she would get the flowers herself [laughing] but the *Jane Eyre* comparison is -- it's really uncanny to me. In terms of a number of things. In terms of a sort of an orphan's life, in terms of what it means to have so much fire and intelligence to rage against the system. What it means to be so utterly trapped in such an oppressive society, in such oppressive circumstances. What it means to yearn and love and desire. I mean it's interesting, when we've talked about *Jane Eyre*,

we – we keep coming back to these questions of power and desire. And I feel like *This Is All I Got*, similarly, is a book in which the central questions are about power and desire. And who even has the power to desire? One of the things that I think about a lot, and I wrote about in the book, is how, you know, Camilla's twenty-two when we meet her. I think we all have had our experiences of being twenty-two or we'll soon have them, if we're not that old yet. That you know, we imagine a certain degree of risk-taking and passion and experimentation. With a – with a reasonable margin of error. And one of the things that I – I think about a lot when it comes to Camilla and people like Camilla is what it means to live with no margin of error.

V: Mhmm.

L: And therefore, not be entitled to that sort of passion, that sort of experimentation, that most people deem just an ordinary part of being a person in your late teens or your early twenties, that's the time in your life when you are supposed to go forth and take risks and feel and want. And she has all of that in her, of course, and it's one of the reasons I was so magnetized to her, is because she is someone with so much desire and so much energy. And there's a lot of Jane in there, what it means to really love, to want to connect, to want to feel deep sisterhood, to want to experience the world, to want to push back, and what it means to be trapped, what it means to be silenced, what it means to be unsafe, are all things that Jane comes up against, very much the way that Camilla does. Yeah, they're very similar people to me.

V: Like, uh, this is just so not why we asked you to be on the podcast, right? It's not – it had nothing to do with it, and yet it is just the most striking thing. And I feel like it is one of the gifts that you will bring to the podcast, is right, like, *Jane Eyre* might feel antiquated in a lot of ways, and it is antiquated in a lot of ways. And yet actually society has just gotten worse in so many ways. For people on the margins and systems there, right? Like, we know what we can do to fix it, and we as a society just so deeply do not want to. And it's been two hundred years and it's not better.

L: Yeah I mean I'd love to think that Brontë would read *This Is All I Got*, and recognize it, see it, feel it, and be furious.

V: Yeah. I mean, *Jane Eyre*, right, like could be called *This Is All I Got*. [laughing] Right? She is like "this is everything that I can do!" Even with Jane it almost kills her! It almost kills her.

L: Mhmm. Mhmm.

V: Everybody, I morally implore you [Lauren laughs] – but that makes it sound like a homework assignment. Everybody, go put on a bikini [Lauren laughs again] and read this book. It's summertime. This is like, a complete page turner. It is also a love story between you the reader and Camilla. Like you are just gonna fall completely in love with this woman. So like, go put on a bikini, buy this in paperback, read it at the beach, send us photos. And we can't wait to post them. And Lauren I can't wait for all of our listeners to get to know you the way that I have, even I – like I hope you cause some breakups! [Lauren laughs] People are gonna hear you and be like "Ugh! I deserve more!"

L: I'm gonna set everyone's life on fire. That is my goal. [Laughing]

V: Yeah. Been doin' it since before you met me! [pause] And everybody, starting July second, more conversations like this *On Eyre*, which Lauren named, right here in the *Hot and Bothered* feed.

L: I can't wait.

V: Me too.

[theme music begins]

V: This episode of Hot and Bothered was executive produced by Ariana Nedelman and edited by AJ Yarmez. We wanna give a special thanks this week, of course, to Lauren Sandler and to all of our Patrons. I'm Vanessa Zoltan and we'll talk to you soon.

[theme music fades, ends]