



Not Sorry Works

On Eyre

Take The Maniac With You to England (Chapter 27, Part 1)

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Vanessa Zoltan [00:00:00] We are spending two episodes talking about this one chapter, chapter twenty seven, because while very little plot happens, a lot of really complicated things are said. [Intro music begins] Last chapter we left Jane in her room. Jane is despondent that no one has come to look for her in her room. But after being in it all day after the catastrophe of her wedding, she realizes that she hasn't eaten and so leaves her room at last. Rochester is waiting for her right outside of her door, and they end up having an in-depth conversation.

A lot happens between Rochester and Jane in this chapter. Rochester is desperately trying to convince Jane to stay with him. He seems as though he is going to get violent at two points, tells Jane that he could rape her, and Jane outmaneuvers him. Jane seriously considers staying with him, the man she loves, but decides that she has to leave and goes. We are going to get into all of that in next week's episode.

In today's episode, we are going to talk about what we learned about Bertha Antoinetta Mason Rochester in this chapter. This whole chapter is a conversation between Rochester and Jane, which is to say that we don't spend time with Bertha in this chapter, nor ever again in the novel. Bertha doesn't say a word of her own story in her own defense. She was never considered on her own terms. She doesn't appear as a person, only as an obstacle to Rochester and Jane and their love. Because Bertha is never on the page again in the novel, everything we learn about her is in Rochester's version of her. And Rochester has a motive in her portrayal. He wants to demonstrate to Jane that Bertha was untenable as a wife and therefore not really his wife at all. And so this is the story he tells about Bertha, to that end.

Firstly, Rochester tells us that it is not because Bertha is mad that he hates her. He tells us that he was tricked into marrying her by his father and older brother. Bertha was rich, but Rochester's father didn't tell him that as Rochester was sent to Jamaica. He was only told that Bertha was beautiful and quote "the boast of Spanish town," which is enough to lure the 22 year old recent college grad to Jamaica to meet his new wife. But it wasn't only Rochester's father who conspired against him for their marriage. Rochester tells us that Bertha's family was also in on the manipulation of this young couple. The Masons wanted Rochester as Bertha's husband because Rochester tells us "he was of a good race." Rochester reports that Bertha's family only showed her to him at parties, splendidly dressed. The passive tense is used here because Rochester doesn't want us to believe that Bertha had any real say, nor did he. His claim is that both he and Bertha were blameless and were ill informed in their consent to marry one another. His claim is that they were both puppets of their families.

Bertha was a well behaved puppet of this plan. She flattered Rochester and quote, "lavishly displayed her charms and accomplishments." Other men flirted with Bertha, which made Rochester want her all the more. He tells us that he thought he loved her, but it was just his youthful idiocy, plus familial manipulation on both sides. He says quote, "Marriage was

achieved almost before I knew where I was." Then he tells us that once the honeymoon was over, he met Bertha's mother for the first time. He had been told that his mother in law was dead. She was, it turns out, quote, "mad, and shut up in a lunatic asylum." He learns a younger brother was also mad and had killed himself. Rochester tells us that he wouldn't have judged Bertha for all of this lying and manipulation, in fact he would keep enduring her, even though he, it turned out, had a deep distaste for her. He hated her manners, her interests, and they couldn't keep a servant because of Bertha's violent and unreasonable temper. He tells Jane that he didn't even hate Bertha when her character ripened and developed with a frightful rapidity. And throughout all of this argument, Rochester keeps telling Jane that Bertha was quote, "the true daughter of her Creole mother." But even for *that*, he wouldn't have left her or hated her. He doesn't explain to us when the flip happens, but he does come to the conclusion that he *hated* this woman who he was tied to forever, and hates her with a passion.

Here is Tom Zoellner, who you might remember from the end of our second episode on how Bertha would have been constructed in Charlotte Bronte's imagination. It's all based on imperialist and racist notions that Bronte seems to not be able to break out of.

Tom Zoellner [00:05:23] Bertha's uncertain racial heritage would have been a matter, certainly, for proper British society to turn up their noses at. This idea of Jamaica as a, as a place of race mixing, that was very much grounded in reality. There were a number of offspring from typically a wealthy white plantation owner or what was called an attorney, which actually had nothing to do with the practice of the law, but rather kind of the power of attorney that these absentee landowners back in Britain hired these guys to manage their estates. They were generally regarded as unethical. The sexual behavior on Jamaican sugar estates was famously described as anarchy.

And so Bertha, yeah, she is suspected to have had at least one drop of black blood in her, as the contemporary saying went. But there was another dynamic going on, which I think is really interesting, which is that white Jamaican women were regarded as crass, as being kind of frontier types who were loud, they talked in this kind of funny accent, which was not the proper King's English. They were known for their loose sexual behavior. There were very few white wives in Jamaica, actually. The idea is that you, as a British male, would go out there and sleep with as many, or rape as many, slaves as you could, acquire as much land as you could in a hurry - get rich or die trying, and get back to England as fast as you could because Jamaica was a deadly place. So there was a woman-on-woman suspicion, of Jamaican women, and Bertha just fits the picture.

Vanessa [00:07:15] Most scholars we talked to believe that Bertha was most likely supposed to be white. There is no way of knowing, of course, but it seems as though the picture that Bronte might be painting is one of the quote, "white Jamaican woman." Bronte most likely did not know any white Jamaican women, but she would know the stereotypes about them: that the white Jamaican woman would get *infected* by her time in the Caribbean and take to drinking and madness. Like the fortune telling Gypsy we talked about previously, these were racist literary inventions that kept getting passed on from novelist to novelist. In this case, that stereotype being that regardless of whether you are Black or not, the Caribbean will infect you. So of course, Bertha is seen as mad. Jane, on the other hand, is an elf, straight from

pre-Christ England, never infected at all. Here is Elsie Michie on how Bronte writes about Bertha.

Elsie Michie [00:08:23] You know a Marxist critic talks about how at any moment that you're writing, there's an ideological horizon, and it's not possible for the author in that moment to get *past* the ideological horizon. So I think, I think you can see in Bertha Mason both what Charlotte Bronte could think about and what she couldn't, right, what she *couldn't* get beyond. So some of it she can really think about and show, but some of it she can't, right, and so she reinforces it.

[intro music begins again]

Vanessa [00:08:51] Rochester still says that he didn't judge Bertha. He's simply moved on to despair. In fact, he was suicidal with the feeling of being tied to this woman for the rest of his life. After four years of marriage, he rebukes the whole thing. He begins to live as though he is not married to her. Law and church be damned. He believes that he has a right to love and be loved and will act accordingly. This is when a breeze came from Europe, and Rochester tells us that the breeze told him to quote, "Go and live again in Europe, lock up the wife, and behave as though she doesn't exist." So that's what he does. And then he meets Jane, and we get to the night of their would-be-wedding, the night in which his secret is officially out, and when he tells the tale to Jane in his own words and with his own agenda.

But the facts of the case are this: Bertha Antoinetta Mason Rochester was married off to a man who got her money, took her halfway across the world, locked her in an attic for 10 years, and then tried to marry the governess. I'm Vanessa Zoltan -

Lauren Sandler [00:10:08] and I'm Lauren Sandler -

Vanessa [00:10:09] and this is On Eyre from Hot and Bothered. [Intro music fades out]

Lauren, what don't we need to know in order [laughs] to try to understand this chapter? I feel like two episodes isn't enough. Maybe we should do a whole podcast called Chapter 27.

Lauren [00:10:32] Maybe we should just do a whole podcast called Deconstructing Bertha. Right? I mean, we have to talk about imperialism and mental health and race and divorce law and- in another book, we have to acknowledge and contextualize a little bit a book called *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which most modern readers know exists in dialogue with Jane Eyre. So *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a book that wasn't published until 1966 by a writer named Jean Rhys, and Jean Rhys was Creole herself. She was the daughter of a Welshman and a white Creole. She grew up in Dominica and lived there until she was 16. And she was deeply vexed, I think understandably, by the portrayal of Bertha in this book. So she writes, essentially a prequel - essentially Bertha's backstory, as a response to Jane Eyre. It does carry into the book. It exists in thirds. The first section is, is her childhood in a post abolition moment of deep, deep trauma. The second part of the book is mainly told through Rochester's perspective about their courtship and their honeymoon. And then there's a little coda at the end, which is told in Grace Poole's voice, and the story is very much a trauma story, a story about what it means to be white in Jamaica after abolition, to be poor until there is a step family that comes in with money, to survive the death of her brother and her mother's incredible grief at his death,

which then leads her own mother to being institutionalized. That's the backstory for her mother's insanity.

And then the onslaught of a very destructive relationship, which neither member of the marriage actively chose, with someone who clearly cannot stand being in a tropical climate, in a foreign culture, with a woman who is of that climate and that culture. And it's - it's really a lot that happens in a very, very slim book because, like this episode, it takes on all of these different issues.

We aren't going to spend this episode on this book, but I do think it's really important that we contextualize it a little bit. And to do that, I wanted to quote from sort of the ultimate postcolonialist scholar, a woman named Gayatri Spivak, who is Indian born, teaches at Columbia, is seen very much as the person who has made how we think of literary theory from a postcolonial perspective, and her most seminal paper, I would say, is entitled "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism." One of those texts is, of course, *Jane Eyre*. So here's what she says: "It should not be possible to read 19th century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English. The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored. These two obvious facts continue to be disregarded in the reading of 19th century British literature. This itself attests to the continuing success of the imperialist project displaced and dispersed into more modern forms."

And then she wraps up the essay, saying, "I try to extend, outside of the reach of the European novelistic tradition, the most powerful suggestion in *Wide Sargasso Sea*: that *Jane Eyre* can be read as the orchestration and staging of the self-immolation of Bertha Mason as The Good Wife, I would hope that an informed critique of imperialism granted some attention from readers."

So I think that this is an opportunity for our own informed critique of imperialism and really what it means to wrestle with that ideological horizon that Elsie Michie mentioned and the reality of history that Tom Zoellner introduced to us. And for me in terms of sort of the project of thinking about whether *Jane Eyre* can and should be passed along, this, to me, is the real stumbling block: is Bertha and how we can understand her portrayal, how we understand it through Rochester, through Jane, and through Charlotte Bronte herself.

Vanessa [00:15:20] Lauren, one of the things that I've just so appreciated learning through the research for this podcast is that the agenda of British literature, as Spivak says, right, that the crucial part of portraying England's social mission as the cultural representation of England to the English, right? That there is a self-mythologizing that's constantly happening. That imperialism is a good thing, right? It's part of England's social mission. And that they're fortune teller Gypsy's that are going to come to your door and like, mess things up, right? When these are completely constructed ideas.

And you know, something else that I learned while researching is that the way that asylums are presented in this chapter, in Chapter Twenty Seven, is a completely fictional idea of the way that mental health was treated in the 19th century. People were mostly kept at home. Rochester makes this argument to Jane that I always have found very compelling of like: look, I

couldn't ever get myself to beat her and I couldn't get myself to lock her in an asylum. And so I brought her here with me because at least I'd know she had good care here when the rest of society would probably have her in an asylum. And that's not true! That is absolutely an idea that Daniel Defoe started writing about just as a plot device several years before this. And so getting to this like Michie's idea of what were the horizons that she couldn't see behind and to Spivak's idea of, like: what is she actively complicit in creating this intentional representation of England to the English and perpetuating these deeply racist ideas with imperialism? It brings questions to me about Charlotte's education. Did she read these books and think that they were factual and that Defoe had done his research and therefore just started buying into these ideas? Or did she know that she was in part creating this mythology?

Lauren [00:17:22] It's also interesting to apply that questioning to how she would have understood abolition in the Caribbean, you know. Is this some act of performed wokeness that Jane is there raging against slavery and yet we get these portrayals? Or is she someone who actually did the work, as we now say, and had a much more deeply informed understanding of how complicated life was in the years following abolition in the colonies? And I would think that this would be a discussion that would not be unknown to Charlotte. I mean - people like Rochester were coming back and forth between the colonies and England. You know, what was happening economically and socially in what Britain still owned abroad - that was something that I would think would be on Bronte's ideological horizon.

Vanessa [00:18:23] I absolutely think that we have reason to believe that Bronte is aware of all of these conversations, right - about post abolition in the Caribbean, right? Like she's in Manchester, visiting her friend Elizabeth Gaskell fairly frequently. We think of her as this woman who's in the small town of Howarth and is the daughter of a minister, but she is also attending parties where there are salons talking about political and social problems of the time. So I think we have to believe that she knows about how complicated this is and yet chooses to render this in this way.

It's just weird, right? She could have just made Bertha mad. She could have just made Bertha a crazy lady who Rochester married in Italy and, right, like - same story, but Italy or France. But instead she just situates it where she does, and I don't know if I'm supposed to take this is like a great progressive political move or just an exploitation of these like easy racist imperialist tropes. And I feel like we're going to come up against the same questions with St. John. It's never clear which way to see her.

Lauren [00:19:41] And it's not even just that she problematizes the fact that Bertha is Creole. She problematizes the entire climate, the entire geography that Bertha comes from. I mean, and this is the tricky thing with authorship and character - we see Rochester at least problematize it. We see Rochester blaming the very vegetation, the very temperature, the very elements of Jamaican culture that he encounters. And we don't necessarily see anyone questioning him or correcting that. And we, of course, don't have Bertha ever speaking up for herself.

But he does more than problematize the climate. He, he does what I think has become a very sort of European white man's critique of how Bertha approaches thinking, how she approaches the world, right? He - he considers her ideas coarse, and her language coarse,

and her interests course, before he even gets into how licentious he considers her. And so I'd love to talk about the licentiousness in terms of gender.

But first, let's talk about this *coarseness* that he describes - how, you know, he believes her to be stupid, that she has - he puts it, you know, again, racistly, "Yet she has a pigmy mind," he says, et cetera. And it just brings up to me the whole thinking of, you know, even what basic narrative structure is, what languages that we accept, what culture that we deem from typically white Eurocentric perspective - and when I say we, I mean dominant Western culture - to be what is acceptable, whereas everything else is rejected as savage, as unlearned, as uncouth, and as - and therefore as completely disreputable. We have his defense of himself as despising Bertha completely summarized by how he despises her culture. And of course, the antipode that he finds is Jane, who is, as we've been told over and over, so white, so English that it's like she's almost prehistoric English, she's a fairy of the land. And I think that that to me, tells the whole story of how much race is involved in Rochester's search for his own soul mate.

Vanessa [00:22:10] And he tells us that, right? He tells us that it's not her madness, right? He says to Jane, "If you went mad, I would take care of you. She is everything I hate." And part of that is absolutely her Creole-ness, whatever that means in terms of how Black she is. So it is her very *being* that repulses him,

Lauren [00:22:33] Which then, of course, makes us wonder, or at least makes me wonder: OK, you hated her, and then you moved her here, and you locked her away - wouldn't that make anyone crazy? Like how, how much of a mental break did she actually have before you decided you hated your wife and locked her in the tower essentially?

Vanessa [00:22:56] I know her, her madness is so interesting to me because there's just like a real horror novel, horror movie element to this of like: imagine being kidnaped from your own home and locked in an attic by a man who just has the right to do it, right. It is completely horrifying. And I want to make space for her to have mental health problems, right? But before we do that, we have to think about what 10 years being locked in this attic might mean for her. She doesn't take walks on the grounds. The only people who take care of her are Grace Poole and a few other servants. And it doesn't even seem that most of them know that she's married to Rochester, so she is hearing them talk about her in a way that isn't true to her identity. It is like ultimate gaslighting. It is complete sublimation of her soul and identity. She isn't where she's from. And like most importantly, she is, she's in a jail cell. She's in a jail cell, and that's after years of being locked up in a room in Jamaica. And so, of course that would drive anybody crazy. And yet I also want to leave the possibility for, you know, the option that she had mental health issues before Rochester locked her up because of course, we all know this, but right, people had schizophrenia in the 19th century and there weren't the treatment options that we have today. And it's not like we, as Americans, are now handling this better, right? The number one provider of mental health services in the United States are prisons. So we still lock up people who have mental health issues.

So I want to simultaneously make space for the fact that 10 to 14 years of being locked up by someone who has no love for you would absolutely drive you crazy *and* that it's entirely possible that this would have been a woman in deep mental and psychic pain who is drinking to excess as a form of self-medication, and that the world does not know how to handle her.

And like God-willing, there's a podcast about 200 years from now about how we handle mental illness now, that's like, "Thank God we figured it out."

Lauren [00:25:11] Yes. But I also think that it is interesting what Rochester tells us about Bertha before he brought her across the ocean that to him seems to be proof of her madness. Essentially, what he describes is someone with very similar desires to what he's already told us he has had, and behaviors that he's evidenced in Thornfield with Jane. I mean, what are the issues here? She's demanding. She's temperamental. She likes sex. I mean - we already know that these are things that exist in Rochester. We certainly know that these are things that existed in John Reed. These are ways that men get to be men, right? This is the boys are boys of the book. But when it is applied to a woman, especially a woman who we are predisposed to think of as savagely licentious, then all of a sudden it is the sign of illness. Which I think, you know, his description of these sort of male gendered tendencies and her is such an interesting element of their whole relationship because he's very much in, in the bride perspective, right? He's the one who needs to marry well so that there can be stability, who's married off essentially against his will. He may love Bertha early on, but it doesn't matter if he does or not. He's in this arrangement that his family has conceived of because they can't stand the idea of him not being wealthy. And so he needs to find a good, rich husband, essentially. And so there's this whole gender flip here, which I think is really interesting, which is something that Bronte has been playing with time and again throughout the narrative. It's just this time it is being done without, I think, the critique that we are so used to getting from Bronte. Instead, it just seems to unravel all of the faith that I have built in her to see these things clearly.

Vanessa [00:27:19] Yeah. And I mean, we see that constantly, right? We have the passage that Virginia Woolf hated of like "girls want what boys! We want adventure!" Right? Bronte is claiming that women should be able to take up just as much space as men, and they have minds and ambitions - even the women she judges are ambitious, right? Like Eliza is going to go and join a convent and become the Mother Superior for crying out loud. But in this moment of Bertha she is mannish in a way that is unacceptable. So Charlotte's, you know, subversive belief that women should be able to do everything men can do: it's like, well, except want to have sex and, you know, not be genteel as you boss the servants around. Which to be clear, nobody should be allowed to do.

Lauren [00:28:10] Yeah, although, you know, Rochester is. [Laughs]

Vanessa [00:28:13] Totally! Totally. I just don't think feminism is empowering women to behave poorly.

Lauren [00:28:19] I agree with you. I agree with you. I will say that *that* descriptor aside, it's definitely Bertha who I would want to hang out with over Jane.

Vanessa: Oh, for sure!

Lauren: And so this is part of, you know, where I get tripped up just as my own sort of messy, desirous self, never connecting with Jane in quite the way that I want to. There are moments in which I do, usually when she's just, you know, like getting her period for the first time and having a tantrum [laughs]. But after that, there's a prudishness in this book and a prudishness in Jane that I really find myself struggling with. And so when I hear about Bertha's desires and

I think about Bertha as existing as the sort of yin to Jane's yang, it's Bertha's yang that I feel like that's my yang [laughs]. And so, you know, there's just something about it that feels like I want Jane to have way more of her inner Bertha. And of course, this gets into the whole Gilbert and Gubar reading of: is Bertha Jane's subconscious and Jane's desire. And I don't buy that, but I also do think that they are a mirror image of each other.

Vanessa [00:29:37] But I also think that Bertha and Rochester are mirror images of each other, and this behavior in a man is completely acceptable and this behavior in a woman gets locked up. And Bertha just loses entirely because she is a woman and a Creole. And so Rochester wins in the end. But it does - it sounds like they are very similar.

Lauren [00:30:01] Though interestingly - I mean, we are expected to be so invested in not just Jane's trauma, but also Rochester's trauma. And clearly, the person in this situation who has had the most trauma of all is Bertha. And we never get to spend a moment considering that; we only see the results of the trauma, and we see the result of the trauma and the most dehumanizing way possible. So all of the things that exist to deeply humanize the English characters in this book, I mean, just... we know that Bronte is capable of it, but she refuses to give it to us here.

Vanessa [00:30:40] I would say that Jane insufficiently considers Bertha. She asks Rochester, like, "why do you hate her?" Right? Like - Jesus! And then she says to Rochester she can't help that she's mad. And I think that that leaves some space for imagining that Jane is repulsed by this woman on a racial level and on a gender level, and yet has some imaginative ability to empathize with her.

Lauren [00:31:11] And I think that what Jane does in that moment is open up the question which *Wide Sargasso Sea* had to answer, which is: how did she get here? There had to have been a sequence of events, if not of genetics, that would bring a person into this situation. And the fact that we never get to find out what that is, beyond Rochester's very skewed telling, is something that I just find troubling.

[Transition music]

Vanessa [00:31:55] So, Lauren, there's this quote that we're going to look at that I feel like just embodies so much. So this is when Rochester says that he's considered suicide at this point, he is in just complete despair in Jamaica, and - at least that is what he's telling Jane - and he has just decided that he has no relationship with this woman anymore, even though they live in the same house. There's a night that there's a storm. He can hear Bertha screaming, locked in her room, ranting and raving or screaming in pain. God only knows. And then this is - this is the quote. He says:

"'Go,' said Hope, 'and live again in Europe: there it is not known what a sullied name you bear, nor what a filthy burden is bound to you. You may take the maniac with you to England; confine her with due attendance and precautions at Thornfield: then travel yourself to what clime you will, and form what new tie you like.'"

And I mean, this idea that a fresh wind from Europe comes and it's the smell of whiteness and civility, and he's like a dog that catches the scent and is like [sniffing noise] "Ooh," right like, "I can go back there." And just the "filthy burden bound to you," right? And the "maniac." The

brutality with which he is objectifying her and reducing her is just *painful*. It's just absolutely painful. And then he's like doing this defense move of "confine her with due attendance and precautions." And "the precautions" isn't even about Bertha. But I'm wondering what you make of this sentence that I just think is so illuminating about Rochester's attitude toward Bertha.

Lauren [00:33:50] It's everything. It's everything, it's everything about white supremacy. It's everything about male freedom. It's everything about his own martyrdom. I just like... Yeah, this sentence is everything I want to throttle here. The way that he dehumanizes her, in language as well as an action. It just - it curdles my blood. I mean, and even if you break it down, it's like: there's the *lure* of Europe and how *Europe* is salvation. And then there's the *monster* that, of course, he has to *export* from the islands to, you know, to closet there so that he can have all of the freedoms that are due to him. And I mean, "what clime you will" and "what new tie you like" - he's owning, how much incredible freedom he has there, what he's just owed as a man. And it just, I find it so reprehensible and it makes it very, very difficult for me to love him.

Vanessa [00:34:59] Yeah. I - the only thing I'll say is like as far as power, right - like the power that seems overarching to me in addition to patriarchy and white supremacy in this chapter is the power of marriage, right? He cannot fucking get out of this thing, and neither can she. And they - neither one of them is benefiting from it. I mean, he takes her money, but I'd like to think he would return the thirty thousand pounds, at least once he inherits his own wealth, in order to get out of this thing. And so a part of me is like, what else [laughs] - what else is he supposed to do right? Like, he's certainly not supposed to lock her up. But like, I guess what he's supposed to do is leave her in Jamaica and go back to Europe and just have mistresses and be honest with the fact that he has a wife in Jamaica. But the institution of marriage is just an albatross for both of these people.

Lauren [00:35:57] And there was no getting out of it. It took a royal commission and tons of parliamentary debate - ten years practically after Bronte writes this - to finally undermine the authority of the church enough so that marriage can be something which is determined to be under civil jurisdiction. And even once that happens, it's almost impossible to get a divorce, and it takes - it takes an *act of parliament* to get divorced. Can you imagine! Also, you know, it's one thing for Rochester at that point as a man to have the grounds legally to leave her, you know, the fact that ostensibly she slept around? Who knows? That would be enough for him. But if *she* were going to leave *him*, she would need to then, even after this law is passed, she would need to prove incest, rape, bigamy, cruelty, or desertion. On top of all of that.

Vanessa [00:36:55] What she - bigamy, she'd be able to prove. So [crosstalk] that's convenient.

Lauren [00:36:58] Yeah - and cruelty and desertion. So, you know, she's - she's got three in her favor.

Vanessa: Yeah.

Lauren: However, the only people who could actually get this divorce law to work for them were, like, the most aristocratic of the ruling class. It was *so* expensive, you needed *such* connections - it was really almost unthinkable. And so yes, they are stuck in this situation.

I mean, I think that another real evil in this situation, in addition obviously to the racism we're already discussing, is the tyranny of a marriage that *cannot* be broken. And how significant that was then. Like -

Vanessa: Yeah.

Lauren: - I, of course, think that he should have left her in Jamaica, her homeland, the only place that she ever knew and, you know, left her in the care of someone there, instead of bringing her to the chilly third story of icy Thornfield and a life that would just be so removed from everything that she knew and loved. That, to me, is an incredible act of cruelty.

But that said, we find out what happens when he tries to live his own life, separate from from the West Indies, and it doesn't work. It's still too close a colonial crew of these men, this country club, you know - he can't even be an effective bigamist without someone charging in at the last minute saying, "Oh, I had dinner with someone who says, this isn't cool." I mean, it's so crazy [laughs].

Vanessa [00:38:31] I mean, the other thing that I feel like we just have to say is that: marriage being such a strict institution is part of the imperialist agenda. It's an order to make sure that white English people are fucking white English people and that the only children who can inherit are the legitimate progeny of the right class. Right? It's a way of tracking paternity. And so this is also a Christian patriarchal imperialist agenda - that marriage is just a tool in that toolkit.

Lauren [00:39:07] And indeed, that's why Bertha is married off to Rochester in the first place. He has no money. What does he have to offer her? He is of a *good race*, and that is enough for her family to sell her to this guy.

Vanessa [00:39:21] Yeah. So, Lauren, next week we are reading the same chapter, Chapter Twenty Seven. And I mean, this is it. This is the emotional guts of the book to me. This is when Rochester's like, "whom would you offend by staying with me?" And I'm like, "Yeah, Jane, who?" And I just - I can't wait to talk to you about this. What are you excited for?

Lauren [00:39:44] I'm excited for discussing what it means to turn down a whitewashed villa in the south of France [laughs], no matter what strings come attached [laughs].

[transition music]

I wanted to call up Marlon James, the first Jamaican writer to win the Man Booker Prize, to see what he thinks about how *Jane Eyre* the book treats Jamaica, the Caribbean, and Bertha as its ambassador. You've probably read *A Brief History of Seven Killings* or *Black Leopard Red Wolf*, and you'll soon be able to read the next book in his trilogy, *Moon Witch, Spider King* very soon. But long before Marlon was the author that we all know him to be now, he devoured British literature as a kid in Kingston. So I wanted to get him on the line. [phone ringing]

Hi, Marlon.

Marlon James [00:40:59] Hey, how's it going?

Lauren [00:41:01] It's great. Thank you for joining us! So did you read *Jane Eyre* as a kid or in college in Kingston?

Marlon [00:41:09] I did read it in college. I don't think it was assigned, I think I just read it. But also, you know, you grew up in Jamaica, you see a lot of these BBC Masterpiece Theater things, and *Jane Eyre* came on more than once with - Timothy Dalton was really hot. I can't remember who played Jane, which should tell you where my orientations lie [laughs], but I'm - so yeah, it was even if I hadn't - I read it in college, but it was already a big part of sort of my cultural imagination.

Lauren [00:41:39] So how did it inform your cultural imagination as it related to Jamaica?

Marlon [00:41:47] Uh... you know, it didn't help [laughs]. I think, you know, I have a feeling - I haven't checked this, but I wouldn't be surprised if the Bronte sisters didn't get out much. They probably read a lot. I wouldn't be surprised if one of the things they read was Edward Long's *History of Jamaica*.

Lauren [00:42:06] Tell us about that.

Marlon [00:42:08] Edward Long's *History of Jamaica*, I think it came out in the seventeen hundreds. It was *hugely* popular. It's a three volume book. It's - it's even by 18th century standards, hilarious. It's like the biggest prude in the world came to Jamaica and *shocked* - he was *shocked*. And he goes to *town* on the local boring white woman. And the idea that the white woman born in the Caribbean is kind of a feral beast. And the only thing they have going for them is that they're probably considerably rich. So it's too on the nose when we get to Bertha.

Lauren [00:42:49] So I'm curious if Edward Long seems to blame the climate and the culture for turning these white women feral? Is it Jamaica itself that can take a woman of white stock and turn her into a Bertha?

Marlon [00:43:06] It's the climate, it's the country, it's the Black folk, even though they're slaves. It's - it's the drumming, it's the heat, it's the mosquitoes - it's all these things that makes life wretched for a British person. Who just moves there and they can't understand how anybody male, but especially female, can adapt, and they see the ways in which the person adapts. It's, it's you're - you're in Jamaica and suddenly you're seeing white women with no shoes on their feet. And Bronte - meaning, it's, I mean, it's a little unfair to say "Bronte," because I would never do this with a male writer, I'd never say "Bronte," I'd say the character. So that's so let's not put the blame on Bronte. Her *character*, Rochester, then talks about all the sort of fear and desire rolled into one, and he lets himself off the blame. It's like, "Yes, I give in to my savage lust, but I'm not a savage here, she is." You know, we still do it. I read somewhere somebody was talking about how David Foster Wallace used to really punch our own Mary Karr and really used to beat her up, and the question the person asked is: what was it about her that would have made him snap? And this is what - 2016? So we still have it, and it's still a part of that, that's sort of "who is the mad jungle lady that made Rochester snap and do things he wouldn't have done?" It's - and I said it to somebody who really loves *Jane*

Eyre. But I, I resist sort of attacking Bronte for merely capturing a character, a character's bigotries.

Lauren [00:44:56] And I resist the idea that you're resisting Bronte about this, and I don't mean to say that in too confrontational a way, but you know - it does seem to me that she is shaping this character, both through Jane's perspective [affirmation] and perhaps beyond that, based on what she may know or what she may not know. And of course, I mean, it's tricky because Jane is narrating the book. And so in many ways, everything is Jane. And yet this is a book that Bronte did seem to set out to write in the mode of sort of a liberator for women, and it does feel as though she is only willing to liberate certain women. It also feels as though she's very willing to let her readers believe that this is what happens when a white woman or a white woman with Black blood moves to London from the Caribbean. This is who she is by nature and how she will infect us.

Marlon [00:45:57] It's, it's in a lot of ways it's original white feminism. In the sense that Bertha is not white. You know, it's, it's go down a few years until some point of the 20th century, Italian-Americans weren't white. You're - when you read *Jane Eyre*, you were amazed at how much, in terms of a feminist perspective, how much she gets right. As a feminist novel, it's still super fresh. But it is, in a lot of ways, the original white feminism. [Inaudible] Bertha is definitely not considered white.

You know, Greg Tate - Greg Tate, a fantastic writer, you know, formed the Black Rock Coalition - wrote an essay in [inaudible] first album, when he talks about the Black sex machine gone berserk and how much that is a crucial American mythology. But it's not as a myth- it's a white mythology, and the British are just as bad at it. And Bertha, heaven knows, is the Black sex machine gone berserk. What do we know about her first [inaudible]? Her sex, her wantonness. Yeah - it's almost like homeboy tripped and fall and landed between her legs. So, like, it doesn't work quite like that. And then where do we go after the sex nexus, the violence and excess? But it's still the whole, the tainted, the little - the Creole, Creole being Black. So yeah, it's from even then, we have had that troubling stereotype of the Black sex machine gone berserk.

Lauren [00:47:30] One of the things we've been thinking about on this show is about whether - whether this book should be passed on as fully as it has been and how Bertha is written is definitely one of the elements that gives me pause. I will say, for the record, I believe that everything should be passed on and we should just be reading it critically, but in this situation, does this feel like a bit of a third rail to you? Do you feel like you love this book but this is unacceptable, and it's, it's hard to make a case for continuing to read it with the fervor that so many people do?

Marlon [00:48:08] Well, I've a two, two-pronged answer to that. You know, as a Black guy, a gay guy, a person from a former British colony: man, if I start going after books for shit that's offensive, there will be no English literature. My problem isn't that these books carry on. My problem is that critical thinking has stopped. One should read *Jane Eyre*. But one should read it critically. And we have this idea, and it's an anti-elitist idea, that you can either enjoy a book or analyze a book, and that's bullshit. It's always been bullshit.

I - one, a novel I really like reading is E.M. Forster's *Maurice*. *Maurice* is a *shitty* book. That book ain't good. Don't even get me started about what a piece of crap book that is. But one of the things that reading literature did for me is I can find a critical context in which to read it. To say - to get rid of these books or to part them somewhere to me is more indicative of our failure to teach people to think critically. And then in the absence of that, in the - in that void, we then go, "OK, then what's the next thing we can do? Then let's get rid of the book." Yeah, I'm not, I'm not a fan of that.

Lauren [00:49:16] Marlon, I'm wondering where pleasure lies in that mode of reading.

Marlon [00:49:21] This seems to be a new thing. Let me just say, it's sometimes seem to be a *new thing* for a certain kind of white reader, or a British reader or an American reader, that pleasure and offense can come from the same place. I keep going, "Welcome to our world!" [Laughs] I was like, "How do you think we've been reading literature for the past 200 years?" You know? If I'm reading *Jane Eyre*, I have to come to terms with some of the things in *Jane Eyre*. If I'm reading [inaudible], I've to come to terms with some of the things in [inaudible], and we will still list these books as favorites. I don't know if, if a complete literary experience forgoes one for the other. I mean, what do you do with a sad novel? You know, we don't even have to talk of an offensive one - how about a tearjerker? How about a novel that makes you feel absolutely miserable? I think, well, couple, a few things: one - "enjoy" can be a whole bunch of things. I think a book that makes you cry all week is, in a weird way, enjoyment. But I also think you can enjoy *and* still apply a critique to a piece of work. We've always - as, you know, as a Black writer, a gay writer, I've always had to do it. I mean, it's like - imagine when I, as a gay man, listen to Ice Cube [laughs]. I'm going to find some pleasure, but I'm also a so-finding things I can't do it. I think it's recognizing sometimes that with some art, one doesn't come without the other.

Lauren [00:50:47] Have you gone through a phase where you felt like: fuck it, I don't want to love it if it's not going to love me back?

Marlon [00:50:54] Oh hell yeah, I'm going through that now with a certain stand up comedian, but [laughs] because I think... There comes a point where - my friend Saeed Jones, a poet, was talking about this this week - where you realize you're not enjoying this thing, you're *enduring* it. And I think if you come to that point where you realize "I'm not enjoying Bukowski, I'm enduring him." No, no book is owed our readership. And I think that is something that is the reader's prerogative.

You know, we wrestle all the time: art versus the artist, blah blah blah, what do we do? And I after a while got tired of that shit. I was like: you know what I'm tired of? I'm tired of me having a moral and intellectual crisis over an author who didn't have one over me. Just once I want to hear the author struggle with being racist, as opposed to me struggling with reading a racist author. And my response to a lot of that is: if you want to read Flannery O'Connor, read her. If you don't want to read her, lay it over her ass. What I'm, what I'm no longer giving O'Connor is my angst about: should I read this? Should I have the artist versus the art? I think, I think - I don't think, that I definitely don't think they deserve. I don't think they deserve your moral conflict.

Lauren [00:52:14] I guess I wonder for certain books like *Jane Eyre*, which have gone so far in shaping different ideas, shaping different character types, shaping how we learn how to love, what obstacles we perceive for ourselves, how we consider women to be or not to be - I mean, it gets in there. And one of the things that we've been talking about is how, whether you've read *Jane Eyre* or not, it's in there for you, because of how deep it's gotten into the culture. Where do you put *that*?

Marlon [00:52:48] Well, I think... *Jane Eyre* isn't, *Jane Eyre* isn't the only culprit. You know, we're still having literature of women needing to be saved. And honestly, at least *Jane Eyre* has a certain feminism that's refreshing. The thing is, about *Jane Eyre*, is that there's so much to recommend in *Jane Eyre* herself, which is why - I think there's enough there that we can't dismiss her, you know, for her to be sort - this was, the struggles she's going through as a woman, I mean, those are also valid as well. That'd be a sad thing, I think, to lose. I think a young reader is smart enough to see the limitations of this book, but may also be pleasantly surprised at the feminism of it. And I think that little sparkle of recognition or so on can be really, really exciting in a novel.

Lauren [00:53:41] I hear you. I get cranky about it but [laughs] in the end, you're right - we still love her. Thank you so much, it's such a treat to talk to you about this.

Marlon: Absolutely.

[Ending credit music begins]

Vanessa [00:53:52] You've been listening to On Eyre. We are a small show, so we need your support to run. If you can, please consider supporting us on Patreon at Patreon.com/HotAndBotheredRomPod. If you love the show, please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. And if you don't love the show - feel free to stop listening, this is not required. We are a Not Sorry Production. Our executive producer is Ariana Nedelman, our associate producer is Molly Baxter, and we are distributed by Acast. We'd like to thank Elsie Mitchie, Tom Zoellner, and Marlon James for talking to us this week. Also, thanks to Rob Houston, who gave us information about asylums in Victorian England, which we used in the episode, and we encourage you to check out his podcast project "Promoting Mental Health Through the Lessons of History." Of course, as always, we want to thank Julia Argy, Lara Glass, Nicki Zoltan, Stephanie Paulsell and all of our patrons.

[Ending credit music ends]

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