

Not Sorry Works

On Eyre

On Eyre: Final Thoughts

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[Intro music begins]

Vanessa Zoltan [00:00:01] We've spent the last several months combing over my favorite novel, *Jane Eyre*. We've spoken to some of the world's greatest experts on the novel and wrestled with its brilliance and its shortcomings, as *our* ideological horizons allow us to currently see them. We've explored how this masterpiece somehow has been straddling the line of marginalized and canon for nearly 185 years. We've spent these last months exploring how problematic this novel is: we've looked at its pro-colonialism, pro-missionary racism. We've reckoned with the fact that it is about an 18 year old girl and her relationship with a 40 year old boss.

So, here it is: should I hand it to my beloved 13 year old on her 14th birthday in a few months, the way that it was handed to me on mine? Or should we stop the madness, kiss this book goodbye, and relegate it to the halls of *Pamela* and other books that we respect for their impact on literature but would never hand to our children?

As you know, we've asked several people for their answers to this question. You might remember Marlon James and his brilliant answer to his version of it.

Marlon James [00:01:17] 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.

Vanessa [00:01:42] I, of course, agree with Marlon James, and I still have concerns. I worry that this book is too powerful, that its alchemy works on us too well. And as a super consumer of romance novels, I, of course, *always* have to be in conversation with the fact that I wonder if good romance is patriarchy's enemy or ally. But I, of course, also believe that critical reading, reading in community - reading the way that Diana, Mary, and Jane read, the way that Lauren and I have been able to read - can handle just about anything. And there is enough truly radical in *Jane Eyre* that in my opinion, it earns its keep.

Here is Christie Harner summing up a lot of how I feel about Jane.

Christie Harner [00:02:36] My general approach to the novel is that it is both incredibly problematic and incredibly progressive at the same time. And I think those two things are in some ways inextricable from each other - I don't think it's fair to try to put the novel in one category or the other, in the same way that I don't think it's fair to put anyone today into one category or the other. It's often messier than we want it to be.

Vanessa [00:02:56] So the question: should I hand Ellen, the 13 year old I love, a copy of *Jane Eyre* on her birthday in a few months? I already have my copy picked out, and if she decides to read it, her copy will come with a book club of me alongside of it.

I'm Vanessa Zoltan -

Lauren Sandler [00:03:19] And I'm Lauren Sandler -

Vanessa [00:03:21] And this is our last episode of On Eyre from Hot and Bothered.
[Intro music fades out]

I mean, we are still going to talk about adaptations of *Jane Eyre*, and then we really - it looks like we're going to be able to move into *Pride and Prejudice* because our Patreon is going pretty strong, everyone, and we're so grateful. We are about \$800 shy of our \$4000 a month goal, but Lauren, I do think that you are going to have to talk about Lydia Bennett with me for months and months. [Lauren laughs]

Lauren [00:03:58] And somehow I am looking forward to that. [Both laugh]

Vanessa [00:04:04] So we had this question about *Jane Eyre*, right, that we set up at the very beginning of this process: that you and I have these 13 year olds who we love, and are wondering, you know - we got this book in early high school, would we want to hand it off to the young people in our lives? And I'm wondering how you're feeling about that question now that we finished reading this book.

Lauren [00:04:27] I think that the question has taken on new dimensions for me, and I think that as a question, I'm sort of turning my nose up at it a little bit. I am feeling the incredible benefits and blessings even, of what it means to delve deeply into what is problematic about a text, specifically this text. I'm also feeling like, you know, the 13 year olds in our lives, like Sam and Ellen, are far more equipped to mindfully read this book, to know what doesn't pass their sniff test, to *feel* issues with imperialism, to be thinking about race in a way that even we were not quite as equipped to do as, as just a generation or two removed. I also feel like what is historical about this book is also part of what forms us, and we need that. And we don't get to just choose what our history is. And also, I have loved it more this read than I ever have before. And I think I have you to thank for that. What do you think?

Vanessa [00:05:38] I have also never loved reading it more, so I want to thank you and Ariana and our amazing community for that. It could sound a little shtick-y - like, "Girl reads her favorite book with woman who disdains book." [Lauren laughs] But really what you've done, right, is, is make me sharpen my thinking about these things and stop apologizing for certain things, right? And just deeply acknowledge: yeah, it's just messed up. And I have so appreciated that and found a tremendous amount of joy in that.

And so I think my two big takeaways are: one, that I'm tired of separating out critical reading from joyful reading. I think critical reading is joyful. And so, you know, I think we just need to, like, normalize critical reading and say that looking up the source of what is mentioned is actually part of the game of reading, right? It's like going down a Reddit rabbit hole but with a

19th century text. And that is part of the joy of reading, that is not the *antithesis* of the joy of reading.

The other thing that I have really realized for me - I, I'm going to come down hard on yes, I absolutely think *Jane Eyre* should still be read. I think it should still be on syllabi, I think - you know, as much as I believe in a canon, I want *Jane Eyre* to be part of that discussion. And I want that to be a complicated canon, I want it to be a modern canon. But the reason that I think *Jane Eyre* still should keep its pride of place after all of these years is - you know, there's like that biblical idea of "you know it by its fruits." And I think the fruits that *Jane Eyre* has borne are really incredible. I think that in the 1960s, Jean Rhys writes *Wide Sargasso Sea* and is like radically reimagining this marginal character. And then in the seventies we have Gilbert and Gubar responding to *Jane Eyre* and codifying literary second wave feminism. And then we have like in the 2010s, Patricia Park writing *Re Jane*, which is this post-9/11 Korean American retelling of *Jane Eyre*. And I don't think it's inevitable that a text does that, that a text inspires such generative, interesting, progressive ideas, right? You and I have talked about this: neither of us believe that the arc of the universe is long and bends toward justice. I think we have to bend it towards our will. And I think that the arc of *Jane Eyre* is being bent in really beautiful ways and is pretty continuously being back in beautiful ways. So almost regardless of the source text - not regardless of the source text, but you know - almost regardless of it, I just love the fruits of it, so I don't want to get rid of the text itself.

Lauren [00:08:45] I also think a lot about something that you have said, which is: even if you haven't read *Jane Eyre*, it has informed you. And I think that that, that weights the importance of this book in significant ways. That what it has determined about what we desire, what power that desire has, and what powers keep us from our desires - this continues to be part of our narrative, whether it's in like a Hallmark Christmas movie or something far darker than that.

Though I am sitting here thinking about how I was taught the canon in a way that one just accepts it as a given, right? Eating your vegetables was reading the canon, whether it was pleasurable or not. And it's interesting to hear you articulate something that I also feel quite deeply, which is that there *is* pleasure in critical reading, that the idea of having *Jane Eyre* maintain its place is not simply accepting it as is in the canon. It's about engaging in a different way. And that *that* isn't just a way of eating your broccoli. There's pleasure to be had in that. W- will you talk a little bit more, I'm so curious, about how *you* experience pleasure and critical reading?

Vanessa [00:10:01] By canon, I don't mean required reading for one and all. Like, I come from the Doris Lessing school of reading and she said in her Nobel Prize speech when she won, she said something along the lines of like: the only way to read is to pick up the books that excite you, put down the books that bore you, skip the part that your eyes are glossing over, right? And so if *Jane Eyre* isn't exciting to you, like - I don't think it should be required. I think we have limited time to read: read what you want and read what you're drawn to. *And* I think that there is space for pleasure reading that is pleasurable separate from critical reading, right? I think that it's completely fine to pick up Alyssa Cole or Tessa Dare and just blow through it and read it when you are in bed after a long day or you're in the waiting room, you know - like any number of things, I don't think you have to be googling, "You know, I'm reading *Duke by*

Default, and what is the history of dukedoms in Scotland and how problematic are they?"
Right?

And I guess here's my thing: what I want to say is *Jane Eyre* is worth reading, even though I don't think that you should read it in the same way that I think it is completely morally fine for us to read Tessa Dare after a long day. I think that *Jane Eyre* at this point in our history, with all of the people who've commented on it, the ambition of it and the stakes of its flaws - Tessa Dare, Alyssa Cole, Casey McQuiston, right? Like, those books - you can read them critically or not, I do not think that there's a moral need to read those with like a keen critical eye. But I do think that (a) we should read *Jane Eyre* and (b) we are morally obligated to read it with that critical eye, and I guess and (c) and that doesn't make it less fun, it makes it a different kind of fun.

Lauren [00:11:55] And yet I think there's something really interesting in what you're saying, because if it was the 1860s, 1870s -

Vanessa: Totally.

Lauren: - and we were reading *Jane Eyre*, we would probably, as two white women who had access to this book, feel really great about ourselves for reading this book and think that it was already doing the critical work for us.

Vanessa: Totally.

Lauren: But history has shown us otherwise. And you know, I, as you know, I have not read Tessa Dare, I have not read Alyssa Cole, and I am not saying I won't, but I do think that it would be really interesting in a hundred years to go back [affirmation] and read those books and read them from, you know, a standpoint of: who knows what gender is going to look like then. I mean, I'm thinking about how there's a revolution in gender happening right now, faster than the speed of thought it seems, and also yet incredibly slow for many, many people. And thinking about what gendered romance is in traditional cis forms, this is something that in hindsight may seem like we absolutely need to read it critically. You know, we can only investigate what is available to us, and we need to be constantly pushing the bounds of what is available to us.

But OK: so, Vanessa, now that we finished the book - what really is this book about? What do you think this is really about?

Vanessa [00:13:20] Okay. So I had an aha moment of what I think maybe this book is about. The book starts and is about a young girl who cannot find a place to read. And then it ends, and it's about a woman who's found a place to write. Which I think to some extent we could make the argument that, like: writing your own story is sort of the epitome of the ability to read, that when we're reading we're trying to figure out who we are. And so that- that is the narrative arc that I think maybe this novel is taking us on.

Lauren [00:13:57] I love that. I love that, and I'm not going to surprise you with what I'm going to say: I have a hunch [Vanessa laughs]. Which is I would say that Jane was ideally set up to be a writer when she inherited money and had Diana and Mary as her wonderful fireside group

of readers. And so I do think that Jane's resistance to marriage could have landed her in a more opportune place as a writer. But it also is reminding me of a moment that I think about a lot. You know, I went to graduate school at NYU to study with a feminist critic who I absolutely venerated named Ellen Willis. And she became my mentor and very, very close to me. And at the time, I was years into my relationship with Justin, but I just kept breaking up with him because it was - it felt so safe, what was I learning? You know, it was a comfortable place to read. And Ellen, as this radical feminist, I just thought she would have the answer. And I think the answer that I was expecting her to give me is to say, "yes. Run from safety, write on your own, live." And instead, she said, "it is hard enough to be a writer. It is hard enough to be someone who is also wanting to challenge the system. Life is exhausting enough. Why not have a safe place to read? Why not allow yourself that happiness," essentially. And I'm still struggling with those ideas, but I do think that in many ways you are right and that that is the arc of the book, and that maybe it is time for me to get over my crankiness. Or not. I really don't know, this is the big quandary of my life, Vanessa! [Lauren laughs]

Vanessa [00:15:41] Well, no - I *love* you pointing out, right, like - there's sort of two places where this arc could end, and it has a mini-ending. And the mini-ending is the life that Charlotte Bronte actually lived. It is with the two other women in the house, studying, reading each other's work, admiring one another's art, there's a brooding brother [Vanessa laughs] off in the distance. And then there's this wish fulfillment ending that Charlotte Bronte did not get of returning to the one true love who wants you back. And I think that this is actually what makes it a romance novel: she gets all the happy endings, right? Like - she has Diana and Mary, and they get together a couple of weeks a year and have writing retreats or, you know, retreats. And she has help. And she also gets the sex and the kisses and the sitting on the lap and, you know, and to feel perfect communion with this man. And it's - it's one of my favorite things about romance is saying: you deserve *all* of it. Right? And I think the fact that we know that Charlotte Bronte didn't really get this, and that it was a *personal* desire of hers, speaks to the brutal reality of the fact that, like, to some extent we only get this in fiction. But *this* is what everyone deserves. They deserve the freedom to write, the freedom to have a living, and the ability to love, and have children, and - this is their happily ever after.

Lauren [00:17:14] Right. And the Diana, Mary, permanent writing colony that I was envisioning is one in which she doesn't get the sex and the kisses and the sitting on the lap. And obviously, I want her to have that so much, I'm infuriated that she doesn't run off to France.

Vanessa [00:17:30] Doesn't it just make you so grateful for birth control?

Lauren [00:17:33] Totally.

Vanessa [00:17:34] She's could live with Diana and Mary and go and, like, visit Rochester every day and have love in the afternoon [Vanessa laughs] with Rochester.

Lauren [00:17:42] I mean, this book makes me grateful for so many things. Yeah - the notion that one would have to marry to have any of these experiences. And honestly, that is so recent - we don't have to go that far back to envision that world. And for many people, that

still is, even if it doesn't feel like, you know, *society* is yelling it at them, we still internalize these stories.

But this is also part of *why* we internalize these stories, right? Is this book's marriage plot and all of the marriage plots that it has sown. I feel so many different things about this book. I think the reason I keep reading it over and over is that I almost feel like I have a relationship to it, like I would to a person. All these things that excite me about it, all these things that disappoint me about it, all these ways that I want it to be better or different. It's so - it's so multifaceted and *human* in that. And just as we care about different people in different ways over life, I feel that way about this book in many ways. But one of the things that I consistently feel is exhilarated by her anti-marriage stance and then somewhat sold out by it in the end.

But, you know - but that degree of desire and happiness that Charlotte Bronte makes so, so vivid and so real to me in those pages of flirtation and communication, especially at the end: I am willing to believe that this is actually what Jane's true desire looks like, and I want Jane to have what she wants.

So do you think it's true love? Do you believe in true love? Do you believe that Bronte believes in true love and wants us to as well?

Vanessa [00:19:31] Oh, Bronte 100% believes in true love [Vanessa laughs] and wants us to believe in it. Right? She believes in the kind of love that articulates itself from hundreds of miles away, it can break the laws of nature, and it doesn't matter that there is 20 years plus between these two people - like race, creed, age, money: none of it matters because it is true love. And I believe in the construct of that reality within the novel, but to me, it's almost like speculative fiction in that way.

I do *not* believe in true love. I do not find the idea of true love romantic. And not only that, I think that I don't like the idea of true love for the same reason that I don't like the idea of God. I think it justifies a lot of bad action. Often people who are in abusive relationships will tell themselves stories of true love. People who are breaking power dynamics, like we see in this book, tell themselves stories of true love. And so I'm very skeptical of the idea. Now, the question, of course, then becomes: don't I believe in a kind of kinship that you should be able to say, "society be damned"? Like - yes and. I really don't want to entertain the idea of true love among a teacher and a student - that just, like, [laughs lightly] I find that really troubling.

Lauren [00:20:54] Or an employer and his 19 year old governess?

Vanessa [00:20:57] Yeah - I don't [Lauren laughs], I don't like it, but I - right, like, I think the novel believes in it. I guess here's my question back to you is: does it keep people company now, when they are feeling heartbroken? If it in any way is instructive toward the idea of like "the world, be damned, love your boss who's gaslighting you and manipulating you," then I'm like, "No, I don't like that." But if what it is, is doing is keeping people company while they are heartbroken, and while they feel as though they are entrapped in a situation with unrequited love, and is allowing for their wish fulfillment, then I think it's great. I wish that I could sort of with a scalpel be like, "Do this and not that," but I think it's mostly a force for good... right?

Lauren [00:21:46] One of the things that I've been thinking about is that I am not a big fan of religion, as you know, but I am someone who sort of believes in love the way that I think people believe in religion. This is not a unique thought. This sort of "God is love" notion, you know - the whole concept that that for me, what my faith is, is akin to love, and love in both a humanitarian sense as well as a platonic sense, a romantic sense, you name it. And I keep thinking about how Jane was in a place of love platonically, and it was this sort of supernatural, Rochester's-voice-on-the-wind way of reaching her that almost feels like, "Oh, there is - there is this element of love being God here," right? That it almost feels like there's a biblical element, a theological element even, that that *draws* her to him finally, that is outside the bounds of human understanding, that feels as miraculous and uncanny as anything that we might find in the Bible. And I do wonder if it feels like love is part of the theology of this text. I mean, I still am trying to understand what the theology of this text *is*.

Vanessa [00:23:07] Yeah, the theology of this text has always been really opaque to me. And, you know, when I first started treating *Jane Eyre* as sacred, I, I did so in conversation with a Christian minister, Stephanie Paulsell, and she also was like, "Yeah, it's pretty unclear," right? Like, you can define a lot of things that Jane does and doesn't believe in. *Jane Eyre* the novel - regardless of the narrator - *Jane Eyre* the novel, believes in just deserts. It believes that you - to some extent, it believes you get punished in this life. Brocklehurst gets publicly shamed. John Reed dies by suicide because of gambling debts. Mrs. Reed dies in pain and alone and in shame. And it's not that good things happen to all the good people, but Helen Burns at least dies at peace and in the arms of the person she loves most in the world, right? There's a grave injustice in the fact that she's a child and dies, but within that confine, she dies as peacefully as she can. Bertha, of course, is the great outlier of this, and I think complicates all of the theology, right? And, and Jane Eyre as a character complicates her theology. And then there's, you know, Rochester bringing in some paganism. There are a lot of theological ideas. I think that overarching the one that Amy Hollywood pointed out to us in conversation with her is that Jane believes that if your heart is good and Christian, good things come to you, and if you are merely performing Christianity or, you know, checking off the boxes of Christianity, that is not enough. But then you're like: what do you think about the soul of Bertha Mason Rochester? And it's just like not answered.

Lauren [00:24:56] Yeah. I mean, I think that many people felt that there's a different theology to be applied to the souls of people who are not master race in some way. And even though we know that Bertha was a white Creole, she's still infected by the winds of Jamaica. You know, that humidity got so deep into her dark hair that it's as though it has turned her into something different. And so I think that the imperialism and the racism that is inherent in this book, it feels to me like, like Bronte was a woman who was like, "well, I'm an abolitionist, therefore I can't possibly be racist. So I'm going to use slave language to describe the plight of little Jane, and I'm going to create this whole narrative around Bertha and her madness and her sexuality and Rochester's experience. And that's going to be okay because I was against slavery." And I feel like we have so many modern versions of this of, of, you know, of *liberal whiteness*, that believes itself to be something other than what is rotten in its heart. And I think that that differing theology is, in fact, what is rotten in the heart of this book.

But then I do wonder how it applies to St. John.

Vanessa: Mhm. Yeah.

Lauren: And I get really tripped up on this. Right? You know, I so want to read Bronte, just selfishly, as someone who isn't a believer in what St. John is doing, I want her to see the ideological imperialism of that sort of missionary work, I want her to have as much distaste for St. John wholesale as I do. And it's not just to the very ending that puzzles me, but the fact that there does seem to be some veneration for - for at least his faith and his practice that just completely rankles me. What do you do with that?

Vanessa [00:27:07] The best, most generous reading I can give to St. John is that Bronte was skewering him and then covering her ass. Right? Was like, "Look at what an arrogant jerk this guy is. He is pretending that Jane has said yes when she hasn't. He is pretend -", right? Like, he is so manipulative, he's outright cruel, and yet everyone has to pretend like he's a good guy. And then she's like, "but he was a good guy," right? So I kind of wonder if to some extent she's trying to have her cake and eat it too. She's trying to criticize this guy and this type of man without being considered a heretic, essentially. But, you know, like all we know is the document that's handed down. And she forgives a lot of him.

Lauren [00:27:57] Well, I mean, he surely does not represent the same church that allowed Helen to die.

Vanessa [00:28:02] Right.

Lauren [00:28:03] You know, thinking about Brocklehurst's sable coat and his daughter's frippery and the notion that poor people should bathe in cold water and be starved to death and not even have the right sewing supplies for their required sewing. I mean, that's obviously a very different engagement with the church. That's, like, the sort of haughty board member engagement with the church, whereas St. John, like him or not, and Lord knows I don't, he's clearly living it, right? He's clearly doing the work. He's clearly sacrificing himself. He's studying, he's denying life's pleasures. He's out there, spreading white people religion where it feels hot and dangerous to him. And I don't like those things, but still, he's walking the walk. And I do think that it is a very, very different place than what Brocklehurst is doing. It's a very different church than what Bronte is excoriating when she thinks about Lowood.

Vanessa [00:29:12] I think the big question to me is whether or not Bronte thinks that Helen and Bertha are just the cost of doing business, that like - "some people have to die for the rest of us to go free, and it's too bad, but that happens," right? Like, there isn't *rage* at the fact that Helen dies. Or if there is, it's very much beneath the surface. And again, like, all we get of Bertha dying is like "her brains are on the cobblestone," and, you know, she burnt down the whole house and that's amazing. But a lot of that, I think, is, you know, our 21st century reading really glorifying this thing that Bertha does. And so that is where the theology gets most problematic to me. St. John annoys the crap out of me, but Bertha and Helen - the theology of them really troubles me.

Lauren [00:30:10] Though is it theology or is it just what a novelist has to do to move the story along and make certain points? You know, does Helen have to die so we can see how bad Lowood is? Does Bertha have to die so that Jane can end up with Rochester and a Rochester who's more equal to her? I wonder where the, where the theology is in those choices.

Vanessa [00:30:34] Yeah. I - the way that I think about it is theological, right? Whenever we're dealing with someone's death and the reasons behind their deaths. Bronte is obviously someone who thinks that there is a real Christianness to the way someone dies. Right? Like Aunt Read summons Jane, St. John is saying, "Here I come, Lord Jesus," Helen, the last things that she's talking about is that it's okay because she's going to heaven. What's theological about it to me is that *every* other character is given at least *some* conversation around their death, but this white Creole woman, this madwoman, right - this alcoholic woman, this licentious woman, right, isn't. And therefore, the theology of the book is: if you've committed one of these sins of not being born a pure white soul, we don't even need to deal with the repercussions of your death. We can just report it like it's the local news and move on.

Lauren [00:31:28] Or I guess you could think this is what is so troubling about the systems in place in terms of religion, in terms of social judgment, in terms of the economics of marriage and women's freedom, or maybe those things, especially in Victorian England, are inseparable. That it's theology driving systems and systems kowtowing to theology, theology oppressing women and then systems oppressing women - that there is this way of living that is considered to be granted by God as much as, you know, the Imperial Order of Britain is granted by God. And it's not just that supremacist, religious thinking that leads to the creation of a Bertha; it's also that thinking that leads to thinking of Bertha as someone who, as a sexualized creature, needs to go mad, whereas Rochester gets to just sow his oats throughout Europe and then have this sweet virginal wife in the end.

Vanessa [00:32:38] Yeah, which, Lauren, I mean, one of the things that you said that just clicked into place for me and that I cannot forget is the way [laughs lightly] that the book - and I really I would argue maybe on my death that the book does this unknowingly - but that the book lists Rochester's attributes, and it's like "check, check - kind of a jerk, but also kind of hot," lists the *exact* same attributes and puts them under Bertha's name and is like, "Isn't she crazy?" You know, it's like those studies where you have the exact same resumés, but a Black coded name versus a white coded name at the top, and one of them gets the interview and the other doesn't. It is *only* revealing of the society in which it's written [lightly laughing] and not at all of the characters. I just cannot get over the way that I always saw Jane and Bertha as having a kind of relationship, but I'd *never* seen that before, and I *really* don't think that Bronte did it on purpose, which is all the more aggravating. [Lauren laughs]

Lauren [00:33:41] And one of the things that you really opened my eyes and my heart to is the relationship between Bertha and Jane. I mean, I saw the madwoman in the attic thinking of them as foils, and challenged that. You know, I - there's been a lot of thinking that's happened around Bertha's relationship to Jane, but never, ever before did I see a sisterhood there. And never before did I feel Bertha warning Jane, did I feel the notion that someone *was* looking out for Jane - and it was Bertha. That solidarity is something that was completely, completely missing in my reads until you opened it up to me.

I would say that one of the other things, and maybe this is the most significant for me that you have really shown me in reading this book with me, is how I do think that Jane resisted all the way. I mean, part of my frustration about this book has always been, as you've heard me say, that I feel her resisting until she meets Rochester, and then I feel that resisting sort of on a downward slope. And you have helped me see the extent of her resistance all the way through the end. And while I still struggle with the feminism of this book, you've given me a

very, very different way of feeling and respecting Jane, and especially how Jane felt and respected herself. How Jane was able to see systems that I thought I was seeing clearly through the whole book, and was resisting systems that I was blind to.

And so thinking about what this book is about, I think that if you had told me at the beginning of our conversations together that, you know, that sort of like Orwellian, the-end-is-seeded-in-the-beginning notion of Jane resisting all the way, I think I would have pushed back really hard against that. I think I would have said she starts resisting and then she loses it, and she becomes this sort of pushover prude and that's why I don't love this book. But you have - you've showed me a very, very different story of resistance - and I think a far more mature story of resistance - than the one I was able to read myself.

Vanessa [00:36:01] I mean, it's Joyce Carol Oates [Vanessa laughs] who said it, right - that if there's a thesis statement of this novel, it's the first sentence of the second chapter: "I resisted all the way." And it's how I was trained to write, right? You write your like introduction paragraph and then your thesis, and it's like chapter one is your introduction and then here is your thesis: I resisted *all* the way up until the point where I'm writing this down. And yeah, I like - *that* really opened my eyes to the possibility that this, this book is essentially plotted as the moments of resistance in the, you know, sort of big skips, right? Like the eight years at Lowood, all of the thinking she does in her bedroom, you know, before she goes down to talk to Rochester - the reason that we aren't shown those is because they're moments where she's not resisting. And then the story picks back up when she's resisting again.

Lauren [00:36:50] I love thinking about the book *Jane Eyre* as a keyhole essay because I think it makes so much sense, especially when you think about: yes, you have each of those paragraphs which are the body of the essay [affirmation], which are resistance, but then you get to the conclusion [Vanessa laughs], and the conclusion of the keyhole essay is supposed to *open* things up into a *new* discussion. And, you know, that really helps me understand why we end in the place that we do. [Both laugh]

Vanessa [00:37:16] And we're like, "maybe best to end the discussion without opening any new discussions, Charlotte." Well, Lauren, I just think that you and I should do this podcast again in ten years, because no doubt us in ten years will have different opinions about this book, but this book will still be working, doing its thing.

Lauren [00:37:36] I think I said during the very first episode, about why I keep rereading this book - that it's like therapy, that you're supposed to go back to it anew every ten years. Maybe we're supposed to do it together. Maybe we'll have, like, *Jane Eyre's* couples therapy. [Both laugh]

Vanessa [00:37:53] Yes!

Lauren [00:37:54] I must say, and this will feel cheesy, but it is true. I do feel like I have coupled with you reading this book. I feel like like this is my happily ever after - is that we started this project, and you asked me to join you in talking about your favorite book that you had just written a brilliant book about on a podcast devoted to a genre that isn't mine, and I just was so enamored with you and your brain that I said yes. And then I feel like, reader, I married you. [Vanessa laughs] And it has been such an incredible way to get to know a person

and their mind and their humor that I'm just really - I'm really glad that we have another one to look forward to. And maybe I'll feel less out classed because you've not written a book about *Pride and Prejudice* yet. [Both laugh]

Vanessa [00:38:51] I mean, I can't believe that there is a world where you reach out to one of your favorite writers, and are like, "Do you want to spend a year reading a book with me," and they say yes. So everyone - shoot your shot.

Lauren [00:39:04] It was a pandemic. [Lauren laughs]

Vanessa [00:39:06] Yeah, fair enough. Everyone, don't shoot your shot. The moment has passed, but I got in right under the wire. I mean, like, jokes aside, right? Not only have I loved reading this book with you, but I believe with my whole heart that women have been reading this book together for almost 200 years. And so, like Gilbert and Gubar did it 50 years ago, and women before that, right? We are this new generation of Diana and Mary, and Charlotte and Emily and Anne, and the millions of brilliant women in between. You know, I am incredibly proud to be part of that legacy and even prouder to be part of that legacy with you.

And Lauren, I mean, the other thing, of course, is - and I feel like people don't believe me when I say [Vanessa laughs] that this is completely coincidentally, but it is - completely coincidentally, Not Sorry launched a chaplaincy program over the last year. And so I've had the honor of doing chaplaincy with *Jane Eyre* with ten women over the last year, and using *Jane Eyre* as a jumping off point, as a sacred text, as a Rorschach test, you know, to respond to these women over the last year. And they have just taught me so much about the novel, they've proven to me how contemporary and inspiring and feminist the novel is, they have pointed to all of the places where it completely fails, and it's just been a really great joy to read this alongside not just you, but these other women. What a special year I've had with this book.

And so we have ended every episode with an interview with an expert in the field that we've discussed. And we sort of feel like the, the conversation that we've had in this episode is, is about groups of people reading. And so instead of an interview, what you are going to hear is several of the people who I've done chaplaincy with reflecting on what it was like to treat *Jane Eyre* as sacred for a year.

Lauren [00:41:10] Wonderful.

[Transition music]

Unnamed Speaker 1 [00:41:23] After treating *Jane Eyre* as sacred for a year, I find myself grounded in Jane's strength and in her authenticity. I see Jane's strength in her ability to persist in the face of so much abuse. I see Jane's authenticity when Rochester tells her that she is an angel sent from heaven who will solve all of his problems, and she tells him: no, I will be myself. When treating dinner as sacred, I also noticed Jane's naivete when she pretends like her brain can overrule her emotions and she doesn't have to love Rochester, and all of the times you think she can be invisible. And when she tells Rochester that during their engagement, they will go on as they did when she was Adele's governess, at first I found it paradoxical that a character so brave, stoic, and independent can also be this naive. On closer

examination though, I think this naivete is a form of hope that Jane draws on when she needs to make it through. The moment in the book I keep coming back to is when Jane is able to run from Thornfield after she first discovers that Rochester already has a wife. Jane's fleeing takes tremendous willpower. But perhaps the willpower is drawn from naivete in the form of hope.

[Transition music]

Denise Leyton [00:42:36] Hello. My name is Denise Leyton, and this year, Jane was accompanying me while I was thinking through a number of changes in my life. A moment that sticks with me is when Rochester is taking Jane up to care for Mason, and he takes her hand and he says that it's "warm and steady." And warm and steady is something that I am trying to embody in moments of stress and really try to bring through into my daily life.

[Transition music]

Unnamed Speaker 2 [00:43:15] In November of 2017, my spouse packed a suitcase, called an Uber, and left our home forever. It was the worst day of my life, and the winter that followed, I went through the worst depression of my life. Depression is a black hole and I don't remember much from that winter. But one thing I remember is an image of me lying on my couch in my dirty pajamas with my dog Ginger sleeping on my feet, watching the snowfall outside, and reading *Jane Eyre* for the first time.

I struggled with reading then because of the brain fog and because every book I tried seemed doughty with pointless hope and aggressive life. But *Jane Eyre* felt different. It felt like a safe, familiar hand in the darkness. I loved and admired Jane for everything I wasn't and then: brave and confident in who I was and what was right to do. I read and reread Jane's promise to stand with herself. "The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself," she said. And those words felt like the opposite of the field of ruins that I had become, but something true to yearn for. I remember being heartbroken when Jane decided to leave Thornfield and wanting her to stay because *nothing* was worth that pain thought. I knew what was awaiting her, and I couldn't bear what she was about to endure.

I remember looking at the 100 pages that still lay ahead until Jane's return to Thornfield, and I wanted to just skip them. I didn't want Jane, Jane to go through that winter, and I didn't want to go with her. But in the end, we both did. We both survived the winter. This year I'm rereading *Jane Eyre* and as so much has changed for me, as so much has changed inside me, I feel a little closer to her silent, unshakable confidence in her own ability to stand with herself, no matter what. I feel able to take care of myself, to take care of the child I am carrying, and I am even looking forward, for the first time, to the winter. I am grateful to Jane for walking me to this place.

[Transition music]

Vanessa [00:46:15] So everybody that is the end of On Eyre. We are just so honored that you came on this journey with us. Starting in 2022, we are going to move to an every other week format, to make sure that this project stays viable for us as a small production company. So early in the New Year, you will start getting episodes about adaptations of *Jane Eyre*, and those will be every other week until March 25th, which is when we hope to launch our *Pride and*

Prejudice season. We are really close to our Patreon goal, and so if you can help get us there to the \$4,000 a month, we really think that we are going to be able to pull off a *Pride and Prejudice* season on March 25th.

[Ending credit music begins]

You've been listening to On Eyre. We are Not Sorry Production. Our executive producer is Ariana Nedelman, who none of this would have been possible without. Our associate producer is Molly Baxter, whose research and early work on this podcast made it all possible. And we are distributed by Acast.

We would like to thank every scholar, writer, and friend who has agreed to talk to us along the way on this process. But special thanks this week to Marlon James and Christie Harner, whose voices you heard at the beginning of the episode. We want to thank Lara Glass, Julia Argy, Nicki Zoltan, Stephanie Paulsell, *all* of our patrons, all of the people I've been doing chaplaincy with over the last year. And Lauren, I want to thank you for agreeing to do this really weird thing with me. I love you, and I'm so grateful.

Lauren [00:47:45] Well, and quite obviously, I love you, too. And I have loved every minute of this.

[Music fades out]

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