

## Not Sorry Works

Hot & Bothered, On Eyre

Reader I Married Him (Chapter 38)

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[Upbeat music plays.]

**Vanessa:** Listeners, she married him. We are in the last chapter of *Jane Eyre* and my summary will be short this week because this chapter is a quintessential happily ever after, a trope Brontë helped invent but that we all know pretty well now. Rochester and Jane get married and have babies. Jane goes and checks on Adèle, who's at a school that Jane finds too strict, so Jane moves Adèle to a better school and Adèle gets the French educated right out of her. Diana and Mary both marry happily and Jane and her cousins visit one another often. Rochester even gets some of his sight back. The only thing that isn't a typical happily ever after about this ending is the last paragraph of the novel. It is St. John Rivers, not our author and narrator Jane, who gets the last paragraph and the last word. It's a bible quote that he ends us with in a letter he writes to Jane, telling her of his upcoming death. He's quoting the last line of the book of Revelation: "He who testifies says surely I am coming soon. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." Not quite the typical "and they lived happily ever after" vibe. One of the things that makes a romance novel a romance novel is the fact that the main focus of the story is on the two characters who fall in love. There are often epilogues like this one in *Jane Eyre* that give you a glimpse of the life that our two lovers have made for themselves. But Brontë's odd ending is something that has plagued scholars for decades. Why give St. John the last word?

[Upbeat music begins to fade out.]

**Vanessa:** But when I started this project treating *Jane Eyre* as sacred nearly ten years ago, I have to admit that I loved that Charlotte Brontë gave the last line of the last book of the bible to her novel as well.

[Introduction music with synth begins.]

**Vanessa:** I hate that she put it in the mouth of a man but claiming that level of authority seemed like one last act of resistance, at least part of the way. I'm Vanessa Zoltan.

**Lauren:** And I'm Lauren Sandler.

**Vanessa:** And this is 'On Eyre' from *Hot and Bothered*.

[Music intensifies with added percussion before fading out.]

**Lauren:** Oh, Vanessa, you keep making me feel and think things, especially about the elements of faith in this book that would never, ever occur to me. And it – it so relates to what I wanted to talk about in terms of, you know, what I think we might need to know today in discussing the conclusion of this book which is...that end, that end which has always perplexed me. I mean I will admit, and we will get into this, that the entire conclusion perplexes me [Vanessa laughs] in many ways. But ending on a bible quote and ending on St. John's story is perhaps one of the elements of the book that has always rankled me the most.

**Vanessa:** Yeah.

**Lauren:** But you said something, it may have just been last week, about anticipating her Christian readership that really got me thinking about it. And so I started looking into some criticism of the book when it came out. And certainly, it was lionized by many. You know, the publication *The Era* wrote, "All serious novel writers of the day lose in comparison with Currer Bell." But as soon as Currer Bell was outed as a woman, there was a wave of criticism that then attacked the book as coarse and immoral and, certainly, as unchristian. I don't know if this review in *The London Quarterly*, which is sort of the most famously reviewed quote about the book, was actually written before or after the book was known to be written by Brontë and that's something I should've looked into but I do think that the language of this review is really worth noting and I'm going to tell you a little bit about who wrote it. So the lead critic wrote that "altogether, the autobiography of Jane Eyre is preeminently an anti-Christian composition. It is true Jane does write and exert great moral strength but it is the strength of a mere heathen mind, which is a law unto itself. No Christian grace is perceptible upon her." And that take is so interesting to me because I feel like it's such a win for secularism? [Both laugh.]

**Vanessa:** I know, I was gonna say! You love that book!

**Lauren:** I know, I love that book! But what's interesting as well is the lead critic of *The London Quarterly*, which was, you know, one of the absolute most revered periodicals of its time was actually a woman named Elizabeth Rigby, who was a journalist and who created this extraordinary career. And in fact, what Rigby's main criticism of the book is is not that it's unchristian, though she certainly goes on about that and is quoted a ton about that disapproval of the book, but that Brontë doesn't solve what is known as the "governess problem" which is that even though Jane can work for a living, she works for such a pittance that she will always be in poverty. Right? So it talks about how Jane is being paid sixteen pounds a year which no one could survive on and that if Brontë was really taking the poverty seriously and the inequality seriously that she's writing about instead of having Jane marry the master, the governesses would have unionized and I just think it's so interesting the way that both Brontë and her most quoted opposition critic both are sort of working with these notions of Marxism, of marriage, of these tropes, and never quite finding a satisfying end to any of them and yet using Christianity as this thing that they need to lean into to make what they have to say palatable, and we know that Brontë was Christian and to my mind, she was writing a Christian book. She just also needed to be mindful all the time of her readership. And I can't help but wonder if the way that she wraps up this book specifically, with St. John's missionary story and quoting the bible, is to leave her scandalized reader with a reminder that she too is a Christian and that at the end of the day, she is as devoted to the bible and the notion of God as someone who might feel that a woman's desire and power somehow exists at odds with that. That – perhaps, that synthesis is part of her intention here, even if it makes my skin crawl.

**Vanessa:** I also think she's trying to say, "Yes, I sort of trashed St. John but also I – I believe in the work of the missionary and I think that the work that he's doing is really important." She doesn't want the fact that Jane doesn't want to go with St. John to be conflated in the reader's mind with contempt for missionary work.

**Lauren:** But that that can be the last word of the novel is so crazy, isn't it?

**Vanessa:** [Laughs] I know. I want it to be something about *Jane* at the end. All of the ways that she makes the end of the novel about men really frustrates me. [Laughs.]

**Lauren:** It's also of course what we fear will happen to women when they become wives, right? And there is all of this gorgeous writing about what true companionate love looks like in these pages, but as much as I venerate that language and I yearn for that feeling and feel

lucky to have felt it at times and sort of exalt in those descriptions, it feels so overshadowed to me by her life of service to a man right now and the fact that the entire conclusion feels in service to men so often is something that I find quite heartbreaking.

**Vanessa:** I do think it's so funny, like the beginning of this conclusion about St. John is, "As to St. John Rivers, he left England, he went to India, he entered on the path," right? And then, you know, in these last paragraphs, one of the opening sentences is, "St. John is unmarried." And I think that, after a whole novel that was so skeptical about marriage, the fact that the beginning of this chapter is "Reader, I married him," but one of the very last things of this chapter is, "St. John is unmarried," this marriage as somehow significant of an ending or not is really...a book has to either end with marriage or death. It ends with Jane's marriage and ends for St. John with St. John's death. And those are how the stories end.

**Lauren:** And I think in tropes, that's absolutely true. I also think it's worth noting that St. John has had the freedom to not marry. St. John has had the freedom to follow his ambitions and his desires to India on his own and do this on his own terms and die on his own terms. And one of the things that I am really struggling with, despite how loved and how happy Jane is telling us that she is, and you know, and I believe her, I mean, the language that Brontë uses to communicate this is something that one can't help but feel so deeply, so uniquely. These are not clichés of love. This is closely observed, deeply, deeply felt love. But it does strike me that Jane is experiencing this love in service to this man in this domestic setting when what she really craved was to wander the world as Rochester had done, as, you know, St. John – I mean, St. John's not wandering the world but he has chosen to go to India by himself, he gets to do that as an unmarried man and I want for Jane a life in which she gets to discover the world the way that she had wanted to, the way a man would want to in the Victorian age. And she does describe the pleasure of her service to her husband. But she also does describe it as service. I mean, her life is very consumed with living in service to this man in this house and that is not the end I wanted for her.

**Vanessa:** I mean, I think what's so interesting is that as Jane ages over the novel, her desires change, right? At Gateshead, what she wanted was to be loved. She's reading this book of birds and so she clearly is interested in this idea of adventure, but the reason that she wants to leave is because she's despised and the reason that Lowood becomes bearable to her is not because she's seeing the world but because Helen and Miss Temple care about her and there are finally people in her life that care about her and I – I think that it sort of changes over time. And then she meets Mr. Rochester and she loves him but is,

like, very skeptical about marrying him because she doesn't want the trappings of it, she doesn't want the collar necklace, right? Like she doesn't want all of the money or for people to think that she's, you know, only marrying him for the money. And so, I think that as she, like, grows up and gets traumatized and learns, right, Brontë seems to be arguing that this is a form of domestic bliss that is so happy that she's not in a phase of her life where she wants to see the world.

**Lauren:** That is something that I am resisting all the way. [Laughs.] I would say because this is something that has been told to women forever, right? You know, settle down, be a wife, serve your husband, you'll be happy, that's the bliss that you really want in the world. And one of the things that I valued so much about younger Jane, and I know I'm a broken record about this, loving younger Jane more than older Jane throughout this book but, is this refusal to be told this is what's going to make you happy as a woman. That is something that she denies, she denies, she denies, and then that's what she's given and in fact, they were right all along. It *is* marriage that is the answer. Yes, it's a companionate, equal marriage, it's a love-driven marriage instead of a property-driven marriage, but it is still a life of service as a wife within a domestic environment which Brontë is telling us is the answer to Jane's happiness and obviously Brontë has absorbed these messages through her life but she's also giving us the message to absorb through ours and as much as she has given us all of these different elements of this book that we carry forward, this to me is one of the things that we carry forward as much as anything else.

**Vanessa:** The only thing I'll say in defense of her, because I obviously agree with everything you said, is that I think that this was genuinely what she wanted, right? She was in love with this man, her boss, and she just wanted domestic bliss with him and to serve him and to write [Laughs] for herself, I think, is, like, a very beautiful exercise of self-care, and of course I want her to want something different but it's – it just seems really genuine to her. We also know that Charlotte Brontë was incredibly ambitious, right? Like, she obviously was ambitious, you don't sit down to write a 600-page novel without any ambition.

**Lauren:** And of course, we know that Jane did too.

**Vanessa:** Right!

**Lauren:** And to your point, yes, I think that – that the degree of her own desire in this is why it's written so effectively, and the ambition is inherent in this, like it should be noted – I should have noted earlier that, yes, Jane may not be traveling the world but obviously when

Rochester is sitting quietly by the fire, she's scratching away at the paper and writing this book at the age of twenty-nine and that's an extraordinary thing.

**Vanessa:** And then, I mean, my question is, Rochester gets his sight back, at least partially, and I don't know what Brontë wants us to think about that if it's like, "Well, he's really sorry so God gives him a little bit of his sight back." Right? Because they go to London for that and you can sort of believe that, you know, these next ten years could be full of adventure for them as a couple. And I – regardless of the ableism wrapped up in that, which I certainly don't think was on the mind of any author in the nineteenth century, I also don't quite know what Brontë is up to. It feels like a divine intervention. That, like, Rochester in the previous chapter made a convincing enough apology to God. That God is like, "Okay, you can get a little bit of your sight back." At least that's how I've always read it. I wonder what you think.

**Lauren:** Ugh, I don't know. It feels like such a throwaway to me, honestly. [Vanessa laughs.] It feels like, "Oh, it can't be such a perfect happy ending if he's *completely* blind so we'll make him a little less blind! But we won't make him so physically equal to Jane that they no longer have equality in their relationship." And there's something that feels like, you know, there's the ableism in there, of course, and then there's also the notion of within whatever Brontë's physical bias that that playing field needs to stay leveled if only, like, maybe a little bit more restored.

[Music akin to elevator music begins to play and then fades out.]

**Vanessa:** So Lauren, for our close reading, it almost feels inevitable that we have to do this line that is probably the most famous line in the novel and, really, one of the most famous lines in all of literature, right, this, "Reader, I married him." It's funny, right, it's – it's so succinct and yet it is so pervasive in the literary imagination.

**Lauren:** Well, I think it's worth thinking about what it is as a piece of writing. What it was then and what it has become. So, as a piece of writing, I think it's really worth flagging the active voice in this, right? "Reader, *I* married him." Not, "We got married." [Laughs.] Or, even, "He married me." "She married him." She's the subject and he is the object. And that is not what marriage was. Marriage was something that...even if a woman desired it, even if, you know, all the Blanche Ingrams of the world put on those push-up bras and went to the ball and worked their asses off to land a Rochester, this is a different way of landing a marriage. And it is one that Jane is very much owning for herself. Just as she has centered herself in this whole narrative, she centers herself in this sentence, in this declaration. *She* married

*him*. And there's something that is revolutionary about that. I also think that because it's such a short sentence, it's – there's something that feels sort of abrupt and private about it? As in, you know, you know what they get to do when they get married. [Laughs.] There's – there's something, it-it feels redolent of sex to me in a certain way. Like, that period is a little bit of a wink. Like, "I married him. *You* don't get the next clause." So I feel like, in there, there is all of this power and desire that we've been talking about. But of course, I think it's most famous for the word 'reader' and she's been addressing us throughout. There's a sort of intimacy in there. She's acknowledging that she as a writer has an audience and that Jane, as an author, has an audience. It's telling us that. And it may seem like a bit of a sort of twee trope right now but I feel like Jane speaking to us is really the truest power in the book and maybe in some ways, the truest desire. What do you think?

**Vanessa:** Yeah, I mean, I love everything that you said. I also do think, the extent to which there is a feminism here – she doesn't propose to him, he proposes to her. But it's certainly, like, inappropriate, the way that she goads a proposal out of him, right? So again, this, "I married him," is this kind of claim of action, right? "I didn't just sit and wait for him to propose and for him to do everything," like, "I went to him." She went to him even before she knew he was available again. And she goaded him into it and teased him into it. And so I think it is advocating for a certain level of...activeness for women.

**Lauren:** But it does also make me think about how, you know, this book that is known to many as being such a landmark feminist novel spends so many pages resisting marriage. And then tells us that marrying him is the answer. And on the one hand, yes, it is, in a very radical way, stripping down an old form of marriage to replace it with a new one. But it's still replacing it with a new one. And so...I think that it is a part of – its legacy is continuing to venerate marriage and...I typed "reader, I married him" into Etsy last night and 237 products popped up and they weren't, like, things that people had embroidered themselves, like, they weren't, like, little works of craft, they were being mass-produced by, you know, t-shirt manufacturers and the Zazzles of the world out there. And there's something about commodifying this and women wearing it as one would wear a 'bride' sash that just, I don't know, it rubs me the wrong way. It doesn't feel like – like it springs from the Jane who I fell in love with.

**Vanessa:** I mean, the thing that rubs me the wrong way is that 200 years later, marriage is still an accomplishment and that if you haven't done it, your life is just not as real. I have a woman who I'm not friends with anymore because she absolutely believed that once she was married, her life was real-er than mine. I-I was going on a trip or something and she

was like, "Yeah, I wish I could do things like that but I have a real life and responsibilities!" And I was like, "Oh! I didn't know I didn't have those things!" [Laughs.] I thought I just prioritized travel in my life!

**Lauren:** So it does make me then wonder, okay, what if Brontë had then given us a conclusion where Jane and Rochester go off to France together instead of being in Ferndean? It makes me wonder what – what possibility could have come from that version of Jane getting married and how it would've built a different version of who we could be. Not to lay it all on Brontë but this book has lasted and I think that it is worth thinking about what it seeds for all of us and how culture gets replicated.

**Vanessa:** But Lauren...you know, he doesn't need to be in search of mistresses anymore and they don't need to outrun the fact that he actually has a wife in the attic. Right? Like none of the travel in this book unfortunately has been virtuous in any way, right? It's either been tied to the slave trade or to running away from a wife or –

**Lauren:** Right, even Adèle comes from abroad and, as you've said, now they need to educate the French out of her. St. John goes to India and it kills him. Sure! [Laughs.]

**Vanessa:** Right, like, an English wind goes all the way to Jamaica and Rochester, I picture him like a – a cartoon animal that, like, sniffs food into the kitchen, you know, as he's like, "[Vanessa sniffs] Oh, I have to go back to England!" Right? [Lauren laughs.] Like, all roads lead back to Mother England where the sprites and the elves are. And they're, like, back in that area, right? They're, like, in this Ferndean, this, like, green overgrown countryhouse.

**Lauren:** And Rochester has his little woodsprite, his pale fairy Jane, and now they have their little spritelettes. I know, I mean, what can I say? I think there's something just grotesquely nativist about this book. It is one of the things I hate most about this book. And so...perhaps it's not so much my wanting Jane to get what *she* wants but me wanting Brontë to just want something different and to feel something different about where she comes from.

**Vanessa:** I mean, it's just so Victorian. A Victorian novel traditionally follows someone either from birth to death or, like, isolation to marriage and this is also Victorian in terms of expanding the British Empire. Victoria gained land and lost none that Elizabeth garnered, right? And, like...and there is just this belief, this profound, profound belief that British people had cracked the correct way to live and that if you did it in the British way, it was the



mannered and most polite way and if you did it in any other way, it wasn't. And nevermind the fact that millions of other people are dying from Typhus. And that millions of children are dying from poverty, like, who cares? The British way is the polite way and therefore the right way. I think that this book is unwittingly part of that message, part of that Victorian message, and I also think that that Victorian message is [laughs] just still absolutely in the Etsy mugs we drink out of but like just an implicit bias everywhere...all the time. It's incredible how successful of an experiment that was.

**Lauren:** And it's worth noting that, you know, as much as it is frustrating that this book ends on a man's voice, it is the man who was out there, spreading ideological imperialism, you know, it is choosing what the British are doing in India as the true ending of the book, as the thing that is worth revering beyond everything else. Yeah, it's endlessly troubling.

**Vanessa:** One of the very few things that I like about this last chapter is, there's still an acknowledgment of money in a way that I find interesting. Right? The first thing that Jane does when she comes back from marrying Rochester is tell Mary and John that they have gotten married and she hands them each five pounds which, within the scope of this novel, is an incredible amount of money. Jane gets paid fifteen pounds a year at St. John's school, right? Five pounds is *a lot* of money. And there's this, like, interruption of Jane, you know, preventing Adèle from going through the same thing that she went through. Right? There still seems to be this attentiveness to the materiality of life that Brontë is glimpsing at, it's not all, like, healing eyes and ascending to God, right? There's still some, like, housekeeping and making sure that we don't forget that marriage is also very much about financial transactions and financial realities.

**Lauren:** Even when you marry for love.

**Vanessa:** *Even* when you marry for love. It's, like, it's never gone. Lauren, in terms of desire, I see, like...the one thwarted desire in this last chapter being St. John never acknowledging her marriage to Rochester. As soon as she gets married, she writes a letter to Diana and Mary being like, "I married him, this is why, this is what happened." They write back being like, "Oh my God! We're so excited! As soon as your honeymoon is over, we'll be there visiting." And she writes St. John in Cambridge saying the same thing and he doesn't write back and then is like, "Hey! How's the weather!" [Both laugh.] Just, like, *never* acknowledging that she, like, got married. And this seems to be a little bit like...not *petty* but –

**Lauren:** It's such ex-boyfriend behavior! And it's like, dude! You're not her ex! Stop acting like the ex! [Laughs.]

**Vanessa:** And she wants us to know, right, that he was petty about this. And that he, like, never acknowledged, never sent a gift.

**Lauren:** I think that shows how entitled he felt to her partnership. And how absurd she continues to believe that to be even if it's like, "Sure! Let's keep up correspondence, I continue to be proud of you! Sure, let's not talk about the guy I'm screwing happily all the time and my two children."

**Vanessa:** That were clearly immaculately conceived.

**Lauren:** [Laughs.] I mean, I've been so cranky about this conclusion and it's, I swear, it's not me just like playing the role of the foil through this whole podcast. Whenever I feel this crankiness, you get to feel this crankiness coming through me. But, I will say, for all of my frustration with what Brontë has left us with, she has also left us with some of my absolute favorite language about love that has ever been written. And we've dissected what I think is so problematic about this conclusion but I feel like this almost isn't something to dissect what I want to read out loud but just to sit with. And I wonder if we can just sit in appreciation of a paragraph here for a moment.

**Vanessa:** Please. I bet you I'll be able to guess, 'cuz it's so lovely, but please go.

**Lauren:** It's so lovely! [Takes a deep breath.] So Jane tells that she's now been married ten years. She writes, "To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company. We talk, I believe, all day long. To talk to each other is but a more animated and an audible thinking." I mean, I don't love this next part as much, but – "All my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence is devoted to me. We are precisely suited in character. Perfect concord is the result." I mean, God, that notion of talking as being a more animated and audible form of thinking, it's just one of my favorite lines ever written. And what she describes in this paragraph, I am so entirely convinced by...in part because I've never read it before. And I don't know that I've read it since. I mean putting this language to what this love feels like...it's a gift and it's a goal. Vanessa, do you have any feelings about – about this beautiful bit of literature here?

**Vanessa:** Well, you and I have the same favorite line, that idea that speaking to somebody else is just a form of thinking out loud. And that there would be no self-censorship and sort of – right? Like this is a marriage that sounds like even though it’s a marriage of service, the way she describes it is a marriage of no compromise. That there’s nothing that she thinks that would hurt his feelings , right? [Laughs.] Like this is just a complete fantasy, it’s like this platonic ideal of romantic love that you can just have like a...an alien-like mind-meld with the other person.

**Lauren:** But then my crankiness comes back in.

**Vanessa:** Yeah, well. You’re you.

**Lauren:** Because I’m me and because I continue to remember that this is where the book ends but where Jane’s relationship with Rochester begins and indeed, all of it until she leaves Thornfield is one that I cannot get behind. And so, yes, we end up in this place where I don’t believe that she’s trying to convince us of something that she does not feel herself and yet how she came to feel it herself and the circumstances of this relationship is something that continues to trouble me. We certainly see examples of grooming, of employers and far less powerful employees, of the sort of manipulation and betrayal throughout our society, it’s indeed what the entire #MeToo Movement has been about. And we also know that it is something that happens in headline cases and also behind closed doors all the time and that there are times when the heart shifts in these circumstances but many, many more in which it doesn’t. And the psychology of what it means to come to love a person in this sort of situation that Jane found herself in as a governess at Thornfield....it – it is still the background to this paragraph and I think it’s worth mentioning because I’m so uncomfortable with it. I want Jane to feel this way. I don’t want her to feel this way as an end to the situation we found her in.

**Vanessa:** Well, I don’t even know that I want Jane to feel this way. Like, this book believes in true love, right? And a love that can reach out and you can hear it across the wind. And something that we didn’t quite talk about in our last episode is the fact that Jane chooses not to tell Rochester that she heard him calling for her across the wind, right? She’s like, “That would freak him out too much, I’m not gonna tell him.” And that’s like the only nod to the fact that, like, this is weird between them. So I believe in, like, incredibly strong love and incredible attachment and, like, you know, feeling so attracted or bewitched by someone that it feels magical. I do not believe that there is someone in this world to whom you should share every thought. Like, I don’t want people to feel shame. I think that I love the

idea that in certain spaces that God could love all your thoughts but this book is – is arguing a true love that matches the kind of love of God, like as embodied in man. It seems like a beautiful secularization of God’s love, that, like, we can love each other like that. And as an ideal, I love it, and in a practical way, it just...it’s not true.

**Lauren:** Well, it is so interesting that, as you mentioned before, you know, Brontë’s writing this as her own wish-fulfillment. I wonder if reading it is her own wish-fulfillment and if that is what we turn to novels for often. And I think it’s really fascinating what we respond to in novels, what we reach for, what we want, how much people want to feel something that can’t seem to exist in such perfection in life and how other people want to sort of deal with the trauma of that absence of perfection. Which doesn’t mean we all just live in two camps – I mean, there’s plenty of cross-pollination there – but, I kind of want then the next entire section of the book where Jane goes off to check on Adèle and it turns out that Rochester has had a maid come to the house and tend to him and Jane has to confront this and realize that it was all a sham and that even with Bertha gone, she still gets to feel the way that she feared she was gonna feel about herself before and what does she do with that? Okay, she’s gonna go to France on her own. I want that book! [Laughs.] But I don’t know that many people want that book and I think that it’s interesting what our own relationship is to wish-fulfillment.

**Vanessa:** I mean, I just want the book that adds the clause, “And there were moments in which talking was like thinking out loud.” Right? Just like acknowledging that they – it is not possible to live in perfect bliss every moment of every day. And again, I – you know, it gets back to intention and, like, how subversive Brontë’s attempting to be because I do think saying that you can have this sort of paradise on earth is a subversive act that I do want to laud her for. That she’s saying, “Look, two people can have a kind of communion that is just as fulfilling as what St. John is up to. And, like, I am experiencing paradise now and that is something we should all be able to do.” I love *that*...a lot. Lauren, we did it! We read *Jane Eyre*. Together.

**Lauren:** [Deep sigh.] I don’t want it to end. [Laughs.]

**Vanessa:** Well, it’s not over yet. We’re gonna do an episode where we talk about all of our thoughts and feelings about the whole book, and then we’re gonna do *Pride & Prejudice*.

**Lauren:** I’m excited. If you think I’m cranky about *Jane Eyre*, wait ‘till you see me about *Pride & Prejudice*. [Laughs.]

**Vanessa:** Oh my God. I'm excited for *Pride & Prejudice* because I'm not sure I know what I think about it. So I'm really –

**Lauren:** I think that's how I feel as well. Although, I really thought that I knew what I thought about *Jane Eyre* and reading it with you has complicated all of that. I mean, this is the glorious thing about reading with another person and reading with all the people that we've gotten to speak to through this podcast. I'm excited to make sense of it all in whatever way we might next week.

[Music akin to elevator music plays and fades out as Lauren speaks.]

**Lauren:** Well, it is time for our final phone call. You know, we've had a thread through this podcast, of course, you know, we've spent so many episodes revisiting *The Madwoman in the Attic* and revisiting the criticism of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. So for our final interview, it would be hard to imagine a better call to place than to one of these OGs of feminist criticism who put their stamp on this book as much as anyone ever and put their stamp on so much writing by women through the Victorian era and beyond and, in fact, they're still at it. They have a new book out this year on writers of second-wave feminism called, and I love this and I think you will too, *Still Mad: American Women Writers and the Feminist Imagination*. So, let's get Sandra Gilbert on the phone, shall we?

[Skype dialing sounds play and then end.]

**Vanessa:** Hi, Sandra.

**Sandra:** Oh, hello, Lauren!

**Lauren:** Thank you so much for joining us, it's always a treat to speak with you!

**Sandra:** My pleasure.

**Lauren:** So, it's obviously a different cultural discourse that we are having right now, right, than the one that existed forty years ago when you and Susan published *Madwoman in the Attic*. I'm wondering if any of your thoughts have changed about the book in those decades and especially in our – our current cultural moment.

**Sandra:** I think that I – I was – I was criticized a long time ago and I was the author of the *Jane Eyre* section of the book and I was criticized a long time ago by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak for failing to emphasize the fact that Bertha Rochester is really a racially-marked 'other' and she's a product of the sugar industry in Jamaica at that time so – that she's locked up in the attic means that not only Jane has a significant other in the attic, I mean, other *self*, a kind of id or desirous unconscious that she is not able to express but also that the house itself had an id in the attic, it has this id of colonialism that's locked up in the attic and that is really, in a way, a – no one thought it was shameful at the time but we can now read it as a shameful secret of the whole culture. So that complicates the book in an interesting way and I – I guess I would now want to add that and I *did* add, I wrote another piece about *Jane Eyre*, about *Jane Eyre* at the movies, and I added something about the sexuality in *Jane Eyre* because, really, people were shocked by the sexuality of *Jane Eyre*, by the passion that Rochester expresses with Jane and that Jane really has for Rochester.

**Lauren:** And of course, Spivak is the post-colonialist theorist who we've also talked about on this podcast who came up around the same time as you but had a very different reading –

**Sandra:** Right.

**Lauren:** – of the dynamics of this book. Does it seem like we're finally synthesizing all these varied ways to think about literature and to think about the experience of critically reading or do things still sort of seem sort of siloed and the idea of what is problematic is pushing people apart in certain ways?

**Sandra:** Well, I hope that we're synthesizing. I know that I'm trying to. I think that, um, Susan and I, in working on *Still Mad*, our new book, we're very conscious of intersectionality and of the way intersectionality shapes all kinds of literary texts. And you could say that, although there was no concept of intersectionality in Brontë's England, there is an intersectionality that's shaping her texts and that from the perspective of cultural criticism, there is the whole background of the – the sugar trade, there is the whole background of colonialism, and there is of course the background of classism where Jane is this – this impoverished governess and that I understood, the role of the governess.

**Lauren:** We have been looking at this book through two frames, which I think we've realized are really one frame, which are power and desire. And I wonder, thinking about Rochester and Jane's relationship with Rochester, specifically from a sort of post-MeToo

standpoint, how do you feel about this relationship and that this is the person that Jane desires and that Rochester's desire for Jane is the thing that she seems to want more than anything else in the world?

**Sandra:** Well I think they recognize in each other – he is certainly a Byronic hero of the sort that Brontë was fascinated by and though she seems to be poor, plain, and little, she is certainly a Byronic heroine. And he knows that when he looks at her paintings, for one thing, and even when he first meets her on the road, when his horse falls and she seems to be some – some apparition. The fact that she's called again 'poor, plain, and little' doesn't mean that she's of no account. On the contrary, it gives her this sort of, um...ghostly or magical or other-worldly quality that he – he seems to see in her. It's a Byronic relationship and those kinds of things go back to – I mean, I don't know how much you've talked about the juvenilia that the Brontë children wrote. Charlotte wrote this whole collection of stories that were the Angrian Tales and, in a way, he is – he is, without question, one of the heroes of Angria and she is like one of the heroines.

**Lauren:** And yet, he's also her forty-year-old boss.

**Sandra:** Yeah.

**Lauren:** And she is this nineteen-year-old virginal specter who's barely spoken to a man before in her life and now that we have the word 'grooming' in our public discourse, now that we are thinking about, you know, what workplace romance or workplace abuse and I think that this story can be read as both or either, depending on one's perspective. I mean, does the whole thing just leave you feeling like...how is this a feminist book if this is the story?

**Sandra:** The way it works in the book, it seems to me to be pretty clear that she does speak truth to power. She – she's aware of his power but she speaks truth to it and when he really starts playing games with her, she gets mad and she talks back. And then – and then, indeed, when he wants her to run away with him to the south, she runs away to the north by herself and seeks strength from the motherly, from the maternal moon. I once wrote a revision of *Jane Eyre* that I called *Reader, I Didn't Marry Him*.

**Lauren:** Oh, tell us! Tell us!

**Sandra:** Just – she doesn't marry him! She goes south with him and she has all sorts of adventures and then, at a certain point, she encounters Bertha and it turns out that Bertha has an old boyfriend from Jamaica that she's been calling to and so the romance plot ends very happily with Bertha getting married to her boyfriend from Jamaica and, uh, [laughs] I mean, first, she burns down the house, of course, but uh –

**Lauren:** [Laughs] So our listeners will know that this is a very vindicating and validating moment for me because I've spent so much of – of our conversations about her decision to leave feeling so frustrated with the fact that she *didn't* just run off to the south of France, I *always* want her to go, every time I read this book, but –

**Sandra:** Oh, well, it's wonderful! Once she runs off to the south of France and then she becomes a novelist! She writes a book called *Jane Eyre* in my book, which no one has yet published, I have to say.

**Lauren:** So our co-host, Vanessa, who is dear and brilliant, has actually done a very good job convincing me in many ways that Jane was understanding the system that she was in, and that if she were to become pregnant as a mistress, if Rochester were to have his wandering eye and treat her like he's treated so many of his mistresses, she would just be knocked up and left for nothing. Do you think there was this deep prudishness in Brontë thinking that the only happily ever after that Jane could have with Rochester was exactly the way the book is structured in the end or do you think there was a larger comment in why she couldn't run off to the south of France but our more modern souls just want it badly enough.

**Sandra:** Well, George Eliot ran off with George Henry Louis. And they didn't get married. I mean, I think that that was something Brontë could've imagined but she didn't think it would be marketable. And it probably wouldn't have been, I mean Eliot may have done that herself but she never wrote books in which anybody ever ran off. I just did it because it gave me pleasure to write about how wonderful it was when – by the way, when she – when they go in my book to the south of France, she publishes this book which is her autobiography and it's called *Jane Eyre* and she makes up a pseudonym for herself, her pseudonym is Charlotte Brontë.

**Lauren:** I love it.



**Sandra:** Yeah, she has a baby and a dog and she has a French, uh, a French sort of doula.  
[Both laugh.]

**Lauren:** Which of course, you know, undoes all of the shade that Brontë is throwing on the French through the whole book. I like that you reclaimed that too! I absolutely want you to dig this out and I want us all to be able to read this as a book club together.

**Sandra:** I would love that.

**Lauren:** [Laughs.] It's fantastic.

**Sandra:** I would love that.

**Lauren:** [Sighs.] So, is *Jane Eyre* a book that you love? I've always tried to figure this out.

**Sandra:** That I love? Oh, of course, I adore it. It was the source of *The Madwoman*, I mean, it was the source of the title, right?

**Lauren:** Of course! It's just – you have, I mean, you have such a fascinating read of the book and you do such a thorough job as a critic that a reader doesn't necessarily know if you're cuddling up with this or if you're passing it along to every young woman in your life.

**Sandra:** Oh, no, how I came to read it was that my eight-year-old daughter was reading it. My youngest child. And she said, "This is so wonderful, Mommy!" [Laughs] So I said, "Gee, I better re-read it," so I re-read it along with her and we had a lot of fun talking about it and then the next year I had the opportunity to teach it with Susan. And Susannah wrote me, my daughter Susannah wrote me a sweet note that I put on the refrigerator when I was in Bloomington, Indiana teaching and she was in Berkeley where my whole family was and she said, "When you're lonely, dear Mommy, when you're lonely, remember the wonderful seed cake." Remember with Helen and Miss Temple, Helen and the seed cake?

**Lauren:** Of course, that Helen gives Jane, that's such a beautiful scene. Oh, I love that. It's funny, we've been talking a lot about what it means as adults to pass this book on to people who are younger. I love that it's been passed to you and I think that sometimes we forget that that – that can be such a gift too and that the wisdom of people that are Jane's age reading this book is equally as significant. Well, it's been wonderful talking to you. I do – *do* want to read your novelization.

**Sandra:** I'll tell my editor to publish it right away. [Both laugh.]

**Lauren:** Well, get on that! And it was – it was just a treat to have you join us, thank you so much.

**Sandra:** Really a pleasure, thank you.

[Synth music begins to play.]

**Vanessa:** You've been listening to 'On Eyre.' We're hoping to read *Pride & Prejudice* next but we need your help to do it so if you can, please consider supporting us on Patreon at [patreon.com/hotandbotheredrompod](https://patreon.com/hotandbotheredrompod). If you love the show, please leave us a review wherever you are listening to my beautiful voice right now. We are a Not Sorry Production, a feminist production company. Our executive producer is Ariana Nedelman and our associate producer is Molly Baxter and we are distributed by A Cast. This week, we'd like to thank Sandra Gilbert, the goddess, for talking to us, Lara Glass, Julia Argy, Nikki Zoltan, Stephanie Paulsell, and all of our patrons.

[Music fades out.]