

Hot and Bothered : On Eyre

I Resisted All The Way (Chapters 2 + 3)

LAUREN: Hi all. Before we start today's episode, I wanted to let you know that Vanessa and I are doing a watch along on Patreon. We're gonna be watching the 2011 Jane Eyre movie. Yes, that is the one with Michael Fassbender as Rochester, with one of the hottest men alive [laughing] playing ugly, ugly Rochester and I do think that when I watch this film all of my Rochester hatred falls away because I'm just so madly in love with him and space. But we can discuss that and so much more with you on September 19th at 8 p.m. eastern, September 19th at 8 p.m. eastern. And any level of patron can watch with us, so if you're not on Patreon, if you're not a Patron, sign up so that we can watch together, we'd love to have you there.

[music]

VANESSA: This week, we are reading Chapters 2 and 3 of Jane Eyre. The setting of Chapter 2 is the red room. To the uninitiated, the red room looms large in the imagination of Eyreheads. The red room is literally a room decorated in red. It is also the room in which Jane's uncle died, and so as it says in the text, "a kind of dreary consecration had guarded it from frequent intrusion". No one goes in there. Jane, as punishment for her rebellion in the last chapter, gets sent into this room, this exile to the red room does not seem to be a frequently used punishment. So, the spontaneity of its creativity and cruelty is, at minimum, remarkable. Abbot, one of the servants, says that Jane might die in the room and then quote "Where will she be? Hell is the answer, so obvious that nobody has to say it". Once in the red room, the true horror starts for this 10-year-old. She realizes that she is locked in and so starts to worry that her uncle will rise from the dead, outraged at Jane's abuse and she will be locked in a room with an angry ghost. Jane, understandably, works herself up into a panic attack. She sees what she notes from her narrator's vantage point, was most likely someone with a light walking by a window from the outside. But 10-year-old Jane is sure that the light is supernatural and so she faints in horror. Here is Elsie Michie, who you might remember from

our first episode, explaining the role that the red room has played in feminist readings of Jane Eyre.

ELSIE MICHIE: The red room scene in some ways is a classic trope of like 70' and 80' feminists, right. I mean here is this woman and she has all this power and resistance, right, and energy, and she fights back against oppression and then they confine her in this space which is meant to like debilitate her. And in many ways, it's the whole argument behind "mad woman in the attic", right, that women's rage is suppressed and they have to learn to be civilized, or in Mary Poovey's book "The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer" they have to become proper ladies and the way you do that is to confine them in the red room. And Shaw Walter, if I remember correctly, talks about menstruation and the red room. So, she reads the red room as a, as an image and she reads it in relation to all sorts of cultural practices where women are confined when they begin to menstruate so that the redness of the room and the confinement of ... that's part of what's going on.

VANESSA: Professor Mitchy runs through a lot of different references there that I think it's worth slowing down for a second. Gilbert and Gubar, who are authors of "Mad woman in the attic", which is the seminal feminist text that you heard about in our first episode, say that the dramatic horrors of the red room, the exaggerated shadows, the locked door, they all represent the patriarchal world that Jane is trapped in. Adrienne Rich says that it is quote "the moment that this germ of a person we are finally to know as Jane Eyre is born. A person determined to live and to choose her life with dignity, integrity and pride." Elaine Showalter says that it is quote "a Freudian wealth of secret compartments, wardrobes, drawers and a jewel chest, which gives it strong associations with the adult female body." Helene Moglen says that it is quote "a terrifying womb world in which Jane loses her sense of the boundaries of identity, feels an inhabitant of another universe and is thence born into a new state of being." And I say that this room is at minimum the place that changes the course of Jane's life. She has such a fit that help is finally called, and Jane begins to receive some kindness, which changes everything. In Chapter 3 we meet Mr. Lloyd, the apothecary who's been sent for because Jane collapsed so completely and for so long, he comes and sits by Jane's bedside, and in her half-childish sleep, she starts to cuddle with his arm. He miraculously does not pull away. When Jane wakes up, Mr. Lloyd sends everyone away so that he can talk to Jane one on one to discuss with her what she wants. Her fainting in the red room has shown Jane the depths of

her own despair. She cannot stop crying. Her heart is so broken by the realization that her family would leave her to suffer so much and that no matter what she does they will continue to despise her. Mr. Lloyd then asks Jane if she wouldn't like to go to school. She's heard bad things about school. Girls' backs are tied to boards, and it is very strict. But at least at school you learn how to draw and how to speak French.

[music]

VANESSA: Yes, school, Jane decides. Mr. Lloyd goes to tell Mrs. Reed that Jane should go to school. I'm Vanessa Zoltan.

LAUREN: And I'm Lauren Sandler.

VANESSA: And this in *On Eyre*, from *Hot and Bothered*.

[music]

VANESSA: So, Lauren, what do you think people need to know about Chapters 2 and 3 before jumping in to some textual analysis?

LAUREN: You and L.C. Mitchy have done so much of this groundwork. But there's just a few things that I can't help but add. Number one is, okay, let's just talk about periods for a second. Listen.

[Vanessa laughs.]

LAUREN: I don't know if Brontë said "I'm gonna write in a room that going to represent a girl getting her period for the first time." It may have been that she had seen a room with red curtains and a white bedspread that evoked something that she wanted to write about. But that said, it was very much read that way that this was the big moment in literature in which a girl, a 10-year-old girl, gets her period for the first time and is locked into madness from it. Right. So, it was widely believed then, even more widely believed then it is now somehow, that women went crazy when they got their periods. I mean now we understand hormones, we understand how they affect your emotions et cetera. But at the time, I mean from the royal college of physicians to Oxford there were scholarships, there were lectures that talked about how when you had your period, you literally went insane. And even Jane is saying this to a certain extent, right. I mean just as she is carried into the red room she says, "I was a trifle beside myself or rather out of myself, as the French would say." It's so precocious.

Vanessa softly laughs.

LAUREN: It does seem as though if this is what this represents, that simply becoming a woman makes you crazy. And I also wanna know doing that at age 10 that's young now, that was really young then. And I feel that if this is indeed what Brontë is telling us, it's a way of denoting Jane's maturity in a significant way. This is something that maybe you don't need to know but I feel like it's fun to talk about and I think something that would have impressed the reader's mind in the Victorian age. You know all of the incredible repression, not just emotional but deeply sexual repression of that era, which you know, was not how things were necessarily before then, right. The Elizabethan era for example was something where people got a little kinky. I mean we see this in Shakespeare, "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is like the kinkiest play ever, right. So at the time part of the response to all of this repression and we will certainly see plenty of it throughout the book was that there was this just this explosion of pornography and the pornography was super kinky and it often had garters and sort of tie-me-up tie-me-down vibes, they were flagellation chambers that people would take pictures in, there was a whole trope of young women being covered in blood that of course brings up this period question again and that bit where Abbot, you know the servant who you described, says "Should I take off my garters and tie her down?" And Jane says "No, I got this, I can sit on this stool without that!"

Vanessa laughs.

LAUREN: It is such a reference to me to the type of porn of the age. And at the same time this pornography was rising up and sneaking into all of these dark subcultures of the Victorian imagination so was a cultism, ghosts' stories, séances, this notion that the supernatural was sort of sneaking in just as it does in Jane's mind and so, I feel like there is all of this sort of winking kink and knowing reference to the things that were completely forbidden in Victorian culture.

VANESSA: Oh my God. I for some reason only noticed this time that that scene is like "You take off your garter Abbot, my legs are too thin, the garter won't hold her down", like "Your supple size are wide enough that the garter will withhold her." I'm, I'm paraphrasing a little bit. And then Abbot just like puts up her leg to take off her garter. The fact that they come up

with this strategy so quickly as to how to tie her down means that they think of their garters in this way like regularly.

LAUREN: Yeah, it's really interesting. I wanna add one more thing. One more thing that is worth knowing. And it's important because Jane keeps referring to herself and her revolt as like the rebel slave. She feels like a rebel slave herself. Obviously, Jane is not a slave. She is a girl in a comfortable house with comfortable clothes and plenty of food even if she is being emotionally abused. But this is what's worth knowing, is what it meant to be a rebel slave to readers then. And I think worth us knowing as readers now. So, before this book was written, there were two very successful slave uprisings in the Caribbean. One at the demerara plantation and of course in England unrefined sugar, you know that sort of brown sugar is still referred to as "demerara" from that plantation, and one in Jamaica which was I think an even larger revolt in which slaves organized and overthrew their masters in the Caribbean. And so, this is very much in the political, social, historical mindset of people who are reading this book at the time because it was a very big deal to revolt against the colonialist slave masters. So as Brontë is navigating these ideas of liberation and revolt, this is something worth having in mind. Which brings us, I think to our close read that we wanna do, which kicks off the Chapter.

VANESSA: Yeah, let's look at this quote that we picked. Again, we're just doing the first sentence, I don't think that this is out of laziness, but she just is so good with the first sentences of chapters. And I'll read the whole sentence and then I think we're gonna do a shorter version of it. But it's "I resisted all the way; a new thing for me, and a circumstance which greatly strengthened the bad opinion Bessie and Miss Abbot were disposed to entertain of me." And just before we shorten it, I think one of the things that I love about the sentence in its entirety is that she knows that her behavior is confirming a bad opinion that is already in existence, which I feel is often something that I rebel against. Right, if I know someone has a certain opinion of me, I'm gonna try to behave the opposite of that and she ... We get the impression that she has often tried to do that, and this is a moment where she can't anymore and she's like "this is gonna confirm every bad thought you've ever had about me, and I don't care."

LAUREN: Which of course is what we all do as adolescents, right. I mean I relate so much to that sentence and to how that feeling is threaded through the whole chapter. The notion that

it's a new thing for her I think does confirm this sort of opening the doors to adolescence in a way that we have been talking about, even in episode 1, about this is when she says, "no more, I have all of this power, all of this anger inside me and I just have to let it out."

VANESSA: And you see her go through a litany that also feels new to her. She's always hated John Reed and knows that he's awful. But then she starts listing things. She's like "well he turns the necks of the pigeons, and he ruins all the plants, and he ... like she literally starts building a case like a lawyer. Justifying this thing that she did instinctually, she resisted because she literally couldn't take it anymore but then when she is calm in her bed, she's like "No, it's defensible, when I go in front of the judge and try to defend my case, I have so much evidence for why I had to behave the way I did."

LAUREN: I also think that the mere act of being loud, of being emotional, of pushing back is this sort of meta-act, right. So, Mrs. Reed says to her "You are going to be quiet and submissive, and it is only when you are quiet and submissive that I will let you out." And that is literally the language that defines what a Victorian woman is supposed to be. So here is Jane entering womanhood and her job is to be silent and pretty and docile and anything other than that is anathema, not just to the culture but to a woman herself, right? It was this thing that's being policed by the woman with power in the house and I love that what she is doing is resisting not just the abuse of this household but these very expectations of who she is supposed to be now.

VANESSA: Right. She so physically can't be quiet, the only way to get her quiet is for her to like knock herself out. And it continues even after she's let out of the red room and she wakes up in her bed, right like she can't stop crying. She just can't stop. And any overture of kindness she also resists like Bessie brings her this tart on a plate and it's a tart that Jane always wants and it's a plate with this bird of paradise on it and all these other flowers which Jane has always wanted to use, and Bessie offers it to her. I really think as an attempt of an olive branch, right like "you poor thing, you've had a really horrible experience, you can finally use this plate." And Jane doesn't need the tart and doesn't care about the plate, right. She's just resisting all the way at every ...

LAUREN: Oh, that's so interesting.

VANESSA: ... turn

LAUREN: I don't see that at all as resistance. I see that as incredible depression. That she's had this episode and she is now just debilitated that she's sunk by depression, she can't, she can't find pleasure in food, she can't find pleasure in this coveted plate, she can't even read her favorite book, she's just gone.

VANESSA: That's interesting. As someone who has been depressed so much of my life, I don't know why I wanna see depression as a kind of resistance. And I feel like especially in the Victorian age, right it was a time when hysteria was a frequent diagnosis right. And it was basically women being unhappy was the diagnosis and they were called hysterical for being unhappy. And I feel like being verbal about your unhappiness is its own form of resistance. It's not making yourself jolly and pretty and faking it. And maybe that's just because she's a kid and so hasn't learned how to perform a lack of depression even when depressed but it feels like this pushing away that feels important. Not just a like "I will let whatever happen happen" but this act of pushing away. And this pulling of Mr. Lloyd. She's pushing away Bessie and pulling in this man who might rescue her.

LAUREN: And she continues not to perform as soon as she is given the opportunity to speak for herself and to speak to her own experience, right. And so, for me I feel like I'm holding my breath reading this and then Mr. Lloyd sends Bessie out of the room so he can be alone with her and ask her to answer a question honestly, which by the way is such a modern way of approaching that and I appreciate it so much. And he says, "So what's really going on, how are you really feeling?" And she answers him and she says "I am miserable" and just the ability of being asked by someone who actually wants to see her and then the ability to speak truth to what she's experiencing about how awful it is there and then to be able to say "I want to go to school, I want to transcend this place that my caste and my circumstances have landed me", that too is an act of resistance.

VANESSA: Well, and I think it is her continuous resistance that gets Mr. Lloyd to move her into a more private conversation 'cause Bessie keeps answering for Jane at first. Right, Mr. Lloyd says, "why are you crying" and Bessie's like "Oh she had a fall" and Jane's like "No, I did not have a fall, I was hit!" And it's this constant resistance to the narrative that Bessie is trying to tell Mr. Lloyd. And I don't quite know why Bessie is doing this, I don't know if she's like on orders from Mrs. Reed or she just doesn't want Mr. Lloyd to think badly of the household. Yeah, what are your thoughts on that?

LAUREN: Well, you know, the first few times I read this book, I felt fury at Bessie for selling Jane out, for perpetuating this traditional abuse narrative where it's like "Oh, she wasn't hit, she fell", right, you know.

VANESSA: *laughing*. Right!

LAUREN: Your husband doesn't beat you; you just fell down the stairs. That way of approaching things. But reading this time with more compassion for Bessie. I mean, Bessie is a poor woman alone, who, her survival depends on working as a good servant in this bad house. Caring for these terrible children, serving Mrs. Reed, serving the narratives of these children and Mrs. Reed. And if Bessie were to say: "Actually she is abused, that's what's going on here," there's no way that she would not be fired from this household, there's no way that she would not find herself completely destitute, homeless, alone in this situation which already keeps her almost at the bottom of the caste system in Britain. And so, I think that it pains her to say these things to Mr. Lloyd. But I think that it is an act of absolute survival. And then she leaves, and Jane is then given her opportunity for survival.

VANESSA: And Jane just keeps saying no. Bessie says "Oh, I think it's just because she couldn't go out riding with her aunt". And Jane is like "No, that's not it either!" Right, it's just like "No, no, no". And I love that about Jane, and we're gonna see that again and again in the books, like Rochester is gonna try to convince her to do things, and St. John is gonna try to convince her to do things and people are gonna keep trying to convince her and she's just gonna say no again and again and when she is sure, she does not let up.

LAUREN: And part of that is calling bullshit on everything all the time. She's calling bullshit on Victorian womanhood, she's calling bullshit on the circumstances of her childhood, she's calling bullshit on what it means that some people get educated and she doesn't, and some people inherit money, and she doesn't. And she's calling bullshit through so many elements of these two chapters, right? Like "why are telling me to call Master John my master? He's not my master. Why are telling me that I should pipe down? This is abusive and horrible. Why are you telling me I should be grateful for the circumstances of this house? I'm miserable here. Bullshit bullshit bullshit." And I love her for it.

VANESSA: Yeah, she's even saying "Why I am unloved? John Reed insults his mother all the time and Georgiana is vapid, and I try, like why am I unloved?" This belief in her own

lovability and like her own just like right to be loved. It's exceptional and it is like the thing that I wish for everyone as someone who does chaplaincy regularly. I don't feel like I see that in a lot of women nowadays. This like "No, I deserve to be loved". And one of the places that I do see that is in romance novels, is women demanding to be treated better and better. And Jane just at 10 knows that!

LAUREN: Well, I would also say as you know I tend to see things as very systemic and economic. What I have witnessed as someone who has spent time reporting on poverty is how, how much self-blame occurs when a system breaks you down and it becomes impossible to resist and speak for yourself and get what you need no matter how hard you try. And how much that gets turned inward. And there is that moment in which she says to Bessie "What is wrong with me?" And there's something about that that felt so familiar to me, right. Like what is wrong with me that I can't just find housing, that I can't just make a living, that I can't just feel nothing but maternal love for my child, that I can't get myself out of this place that I'm trapped. It is so familiar and that is such an element of capitalism as well is to blame the self for the oppression of the system that keeps you absolutely locked down in an impossible situation. And I feel that in Jane.

VANESSA: [sadly] Yeah.

[music]

VANESSA: So, we've already talked a lot about power, but I, I just want to make explicit, like are there other places where you see power in the chapter? Cause there are a couple of other places that I feel like we haven't mentioned yet.

LAUREN: Oh, I mean Mr. Lloyd because he's male and educated has the power to create massive changes in Jane's life and approach Mrs. Reed and from a position of authority so that she gets sent to school. That's pretty significant life changing power. You know obviously Mrs. Reed has this incredible power, 'cause she's the one who can keep Jane locked up, just based on her own behavior. But I wonder what you think about Mr. Reed's power.

VANESSA: Yeah, I think that his like power from the grave... Mrs. Reed does not want this child in her house, and she only has Jane in her house as a really horrible attempt to like honor the wish of her dead husband, of her at the time dying husband. And so that is his power reaching from the grave. But also like, I guess stories have power. Because she's been telling

herself this story that had Mr. Reed lived, there would have been someone in the house who would have loved her and care about her and her life would be totally different. And that story has so much power that it scares her, right the idea that he might come back from the dead in order to like seek justice on her behalf is what knocks her out. And I wonder if part of that is the belief in the power of men. Right like “Oh he could come and change everything, right?”

LAUREN: But I think that’s true. If Mr. Reed were there, he would have the power to redirect the situation for her. And I love that Gilbert and Gubar refer to the red room as a “patriarchal death chamber”, because it is like she is in there with the patriarch, it’s like she is dealing with the oppression of the patriarchy but also convening the patriarch, right. And communing with the patriarch in a way that because the system that she is in is so powerful, that’s the only place that she could maybe find help would be appealing to the ghost of the patriarch.

VANESSA: And Mrs. Reed is definitely cashing in on the mythology of this room being the room where Mr. Reed died, that is the punishment. There are other rooms in this house that are empty and never used, it is said that there are a lot of guest rooms, and this room is only used when the house is at such capacity that it absolutely has to be used and so Mrs. Reed is sending Jane to this room. Essentially to scare her, right, and to say, “you could die too”, right? It is like this overt threat and so Mrs. Reed is using the power of her husband’s death in order to psychologically torture this child.

LAUREN: And she probably just saw it as scaring some sense into her.

VANESSA: Yeah.

LAUREN: That old mode of parenting.

VANESSA: Yeah. Yeah. But should we transition to desire? Where did you see desire in this chapter bare out?

LAUREN: Well, there is this element of desire that we haven’t talked about yet, which is Jane overhears a conversation between Bessie and Abbot. And in this conversation, she learns of her parents and her origins. Which, can you imagine, no one in this family had bothered to say, “Here sweetie, here’s who your parents were, here’s who they’re from, here’s how you ended up here.” It’s a total mystery to her. And the way that she finds out is this servant gossip and what she hears is really quite amazing, which is that her parents married for love, you know not for an arrangement, not because it was the appropriate thing to do. Her mother

fell in love with poor minister. And because he was so low-born and because it was so not the thing that a woman was allowed to do, 'cause as we know, marriage was an economic arrangement they cut her off and then their love was so great that it was worth the cost. Their desire was so great that it was worth the cost. And they're travelling, taking care of the poor together and they die of typhoid when Jane is a baby. And hearing about how far her biological line, her parental line would go for desire, what they would have to pay for it and now what Jane is paying for it. I feel like that gem of desire that gets cut in this chapter is just so spectacular.

VANESSA: Oh, I love that. That she's learning the lesson that her parents loved each other, and she was born into a loving family, but she's also learning that marrying for desire gets you punished. It gets you killed and cutoff and even your child will suffer because of it. Like that will explain so beautifully later why she just rejects desire. Right, she like "Desire for its own sake, I cannot do. I will be punished; you will be punished, and our children will be punished. And I know what that punishment looks like."

LAUREN: I think it's worth noting one other element of desire.

VANESSA: Yeah.

LAUREN: And she talks about this very openly with Mr. Lloyd. She really doesn't want to be poor.

VANESSA: That is what I was gonna talk about too.

LAUREN: Tell us!

VANESSA: So Mr. Lloyd says "Don't you have any other you know relatives you can go to if you hate being here so much." And Jane says, "Well Mrs. Reed says that I only have poor relations." And she, she doesn't want that. And she excuses it very brilliantly, you know. Jane that however old we don't know whatever it is, 30-40-50-year-old Jane going back and writing this says "look it was a child's understanding of the poor, I had no notion of the dignified working poor. I only thought of degradation, and I only thought of being hungry." She's clearly seen some version of poverty, young Jane, and doesn't want that. Which I think shows some real honesty, right? Or like some real like Maslow's hierarchy of needs

awareness. Of like “Yes I’m being abused and neglected here, but I have a bed and I am warm, and I am fed, and I know that matters.”

LAUREN: And I think that there’s also an element of radicalism in here which is, it’s a time when Marxist writing, it’s a moment in which people are thinking about poverty in certain circles less as the sort of Christian nobility of poverty and “the meek shall inherit the earth” et cetera et cetera. Although let’s make sure they stay meek on the earth. There’s a real overthrow in this moment historically about that way of fetishizing the poor amongst the learned class. And I think that she’s saying, “why would anyone want to be poor?” And she’s right, nobody would want to be poor.

VANESSA: Yeah, I love her for that. For being honest. And again, he’s like kind of baiting her. It’s another resistance. He’s like “Come on, you say that you are miserable here and I’ve given you a way not to be miserable in this way, don’t you want to take it?” And she’s like “No, I don’t want to take it like that!” She’s not being agreeable for the sake of being agreeable. She’s like “Uh-uh, give me your next option, sir! That’s not gonna be the solution.”

[music]

LAUREN: Vanessa, as we come to the end of this episode, you know one of the projects of this podcast is to consider what it means to carry this book forward. And I think that Brontë’s use of the slave language, that comes up in this chapter obviously, it came up before to and will continue to. It’s one of the things that just keeps eating at me a little bit. And I, I wanted to ask someone who really thinks about these things, Lisa Woolfork, UVA who’s one of the most revered professors on campus, she’s known for a class on game of thrones, but mainly for specializing in African American Literature in the English department. I wanted to ask Lisa what she thought of Brontë’s use of the slave language.

LISA WOOLFORK: When asked to look specifically at the quote where Jane Eyre describes herself as a rebellious slave, I’m reminded of many things, one of them is one the reasons I don’t like reading this kind of literature, is this notion of the ways in which white women are able to accrue to themselves sympathy and some type of social charge through the analogies of comparing their situations to the situations of enslaved African people for whom the white women indirectly and directly benefit. And so, I find that very annoying. In addition, for Jane Eyre to describe herself as a rebellious slave also reminds me of something that I firmly

believe, and that's that euphemism is violence. And if Jane Eyre can describe herself as a rebellious slave, even in her own imagination, and that's something that she actually believes, she absolutely believes this to be true, then this is a certain type of very dangerous erasure of the plight of the people who are really being harmed while somehow, we're gaining or retaining or seeking to attract sympathy.

LAUREN: Vanessa, I'm really interested in everything that Lisa is saying here, but in particular this notion of euphemism. That Brontë's has been casual and careless in a way of bringing this salve language in. But I have to say I think it's even one step further than that. So, the first time that she calls herself a rebel slave in this chapter, she refers to herself like "any other rebel slave" she says, "like any other rebel slave, I felt resolved in my desperation to go all lengths". She's even doing something where she is not just causally aligning herself with the oppression and violence of slavery, she is really directly aligning herself with it in a way that I think we have to think critically about. Because of how it does radically demean the actual experience of slavery which is of course not even close to what Jane Eyre is experiencing here.

VANESSA: I love what Professor Woolfork is saying. I love the idea of euphemism as violence, right, that like talking around something and not naming it specifically is an act of violence, right. It perpetuates the ability for literal acts of violence, physical acts of violence, to go on. Like whenever we make these moves what we're doing is allowing the violence to continue. And I had never thought of that. I, I just what to track this as Jane the character ages. If this is something that Jane ages out of. If this is a developmental moment where she is in her self-absorption, in her childlike self-absorption. And then as she's older moves away from euphemism. And I'm not saying that this excuses this, 'cause I think to Professor Woolfork's point, it's an act of violence, and it, to some extent doesn't matter if it's a child's act of violence or an adult's. And I think that that is the question about what books should continue, because I also think that is probably an accurate representation of the kind of things that a 10-year-old would have thought in 1810 and so, it's in our reading of it that the responsibility feels important. Because I don't want to, to... I don't wanna be euphemistic about the fact that this got written, right. I wanna be specific about the fact that this was written, and I don't wanna just pretend that things like this weren't written Does that make sense?

LAUREN: Absolutely, I mean I think that that is our role as critical readers. Is to actively engage with these questions and to be able to at least in my experience figure out how to love and keep what has such value while really resisting what is so problematic here.

VANESSA: Right. So, Lauren, next week is Chapter 4, and it's another chapter that we were like "too much happens, we cannot possibly talk about more than one chapter". So, what is it that you are excited about for Chapter 4?

LAUREN: I can't wait to talk about Chapter 4. Because Chapter 4 ushers in this villain who represents the absolute hypocrisy of the Church, and I can't wait to rip it apart.

VANESSA: Yeah, Mr. Brocklehurst is so deliciously fun to hate.

[Music]

LAUREN: So, following the beginning of our conversation about slavery and what we carry with this book, we really wanted to know how Brontë's contemporary readers would understand the notion of a rebel slave. So, I thought I'd call up Tom Zoellner, he's the author of numerous books, but most recently "Island on fire, the revolt that ended slavery in the British empire" for which she just won the 2020 national book critics circle award for nonfiction.

[call ringing]

LAUREN: Hi Tom.

TOM ZOELLNER: Good to be with you.

LAUREN: Okay Tom, I know you've written a whole book about this, and I know that the process of writing that whole book was already probably making something quite reductive. But to really push you to the next level, can you tell us just in a few sentences what the story of the slave rebellion was?

TOM ZOELLNER: Sure, Hum. Revolts convulse through the West and is... at the rate of roughly once every five years. Hum, they were bloody and expensive, I'm talking about the view of the white Jamaicans here. But just sort at the cost of doing business and so you know if you were between the ages of 16 and 60 and if you were male, you were expected to join the militia and drill every month, hum sort of play soldier.

LAUREN: As a slave?

TOM ZOELLNER: No, as a white man. Knowing that, you know, it's likely at some point you're gonna be called out on the fields and to put down a rebellion. There was no quarters asked. And that's that's what happened on December 27th 1831, it exploded in a chain of fire across the island at sugar's estate. It was a scale and a scope that had never been seen before. Up to 70 000 enslaved people were involved in a conspiracy to enact a nonviolent sit-down strike, which spun out of control. The militia did put it down with like heavy heavy hand but the newspapers gave extensive coverage to this. And a month later when those newspapers thumped on the shores of South Hampton, hum, back home it just had an electric effect. The British government was holding its head in its hands going "Oh my God this is just embarrassing, expensive, can we keep doing this? And is abolition gonna be more dangerous than freedom?" And so they called a select committee and asked this question, and determined that it's actually gonna be cheaper to emancipate. It wasn't a warm-hearted decision, that played a role certainly, but the main driver was economic here.

LAUREN: So what would a Victorian reader carry with them when they were reading Jane Eyre when in terms of what a rebel slave might be?

TOM ZOELLNER: Sure, that would be assuming that they were getting the first edition. They would be sitting down and in 1847 having lived 15 years with the knowledge that a rebellious enslaved people in Jamaica had created enormous pressure on Parliament to do away with the institution and emancipation was general through the empire by August 1st 1837. This was an enormous breakthrough needless to say, not just in terms of the freedom status of those people in the West and these, but also a certain psychological barrier had been pierced, which is to say that a link had been made for the first time between kidnapped people from Africa and the status of what you know we now call the white working class. Particularly in the middle inns and these new powerhouses of the industrial revolution, places like Birmingham, places like Manchester where living conditions were not good. There was an imperfect comparison obviously between their status and the status of a kidnapped agricultural labor, but that fusion had occurred. This idea that "Wow my status and their status are not dissimilar." There's a famous piece of propaganda that everyone had seen named including Charlotte Brontë, doubtlessly. It was a medallion featuring a, an enslaved person kneeling in chains with the legend "I am not a man and a brother?" And this was just

audacious, this notion that we share a common fate, that our souls are on an equal plane. And after emancipation, the fervor did not die down. Britain was seen as a, the, a world leader. And this idea of freeing slaved people of people in the United States, in the Southern United States and in the North too, some of them looked to Britain with horror.

LAUREN: And can we imagine that a young Jane Eyre at the Gateshead house would possibly overhear discussions about abolition, even if was not in favor of abolition? Is this a topic that would have really just made its way to all of British society?

TOM ZOELLNER: There's no question. It would have been like living through 2020 and not hearing about Black Lives Matter.

LAUREN: Alright, well thank you so much for joining us Tom. I'm thrilled about your award and I'm so glad that you were here to school us a bit.

TOM ZOELLNER: Thank you, it's been fun.

[Music]

VANESSA: 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](https://www.patreon.com/hotandbotheredrompod). And if you loved the show, please leave us a review on iTunes. We are a Not Sorry Production, our executive producer's Ariana Nedelman, our associate producers is Molly Baxter and we are mixed by Erica Wang, our music is by Nick Bowl and we are distributed by ACAST. Thanks the week to L.C. Mitchy, Lisa Woolfork and Tom Zoellner for talking to us. If you wanna hear more from Lisa, check out her podcast "Stich Please". If you want to hear more from Tom, you can buy his book "Island on Fire". We wanna thank Julia Argy, Nicky Zoltan, Stephanie Paulsell and all of our Patrons. Thanks everyone and we will talk to you next week!

[Music]