

HOT AND BOTHERED

WHAT WE LOVE ABOUT HOPEFUL ENDINGS WITH EMMA STRAUB

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LAUREN – I think?: Hi all, before we start today’s episode, I wanted to let you know that Vanessa and I are doing a watch-along for everyone signed up 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 that man’s face. But! We can discuss that and so much more with you on September 19th at 8pm Eastern. September 19th at 8pm 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.

[Theme music begins]

VANESSA: Today we are lucky enough to be joined by Emma Straub, the New York Times best-selling novelist of *The Vacationers*, *Modern Lovers*, and her most recent book *All Adults Here*. She’s also an owner of the amazing local bookstore in Brooklyn, *Books Are Magic*. I’m Vanessa Zoltan and this is *Hot and Bothered*.

[Theme music continues, then fades]

VANESSA: So Emma, first of all, thank you so much for taking the time to come and speak with us today. We’re really excited to have you.

EMMA: Thanks for having me!

VANESSA: So we are here to talk about – nobody can see me, but I’m holding up [Emma laughs] the beautiful cover to your book *All Adults Here*, and we are here to talk about it because the paperback recently came out, and I was wondering if you could just tell us about the book. I read it and I mean, I hate to admit that I gasped [Emma laughs] at like there’s a twist on page like 15, like you think you know what kind of book you’re reading and then there’s a twist at the beginning and you’re like “Oh, I’m reading a totally different kind of book [Emma laughs], this is awesome!” So I was wondering if you could just tell us about it, and what made you want to write this book?

EMMA: Sure. Well first of all, thank you, um you know I have a feeling that this is sort of the conversation that we're gonna have over the next hour about like what [laughs] what people expect by books that look a certain way, and that kind of thing. So *All Adults Here* is a novel about a family in the Hudson valley, it's about this sort of slightly stuffy matriarch, Astrid, and her three adult children, and her grandchildren as well. And really it's about how hard it is to be in a family, and how none of us are ever really done evolving and changing and becoming who we are. And that's hard, that's hard to do. That's what it's about I guess.

VANESSA: Yeah. [Emma laughs] So I do want to talk about this idea of women's fiction. I watched a clip of you on the Today Show where you were given the opportunity to recommend books and you decided to recommend books by women, and I – I have my first book coming out –

EMMA: Yay!

VANESSA: But they sent me the cover, and it's beautiful, but I was like "Oh we've given up on men reading this book. I see." And so I'm wondering how you feel about that, and -- and really as a bookstore owner, like how do you shelve? And like, I love a romance section and I'm wondering, as we continue to Queer things, should I not love a romance section? Should romance novels just be with like all fiction? And-- So what are your thoughts on your book, and sort of the covers and whether or not it's thought of as women's fiction, and then we can talk about maybe shelving.

EMMA: So – so book covers have always been really important to me, I mean my husband designs book jackets. So when my first novel was coming out, I said "Okay, whatever you do, I just don't want a woman's face on the cover. [rustling] Visual, okay, it's a big ol' – big ol' woman's face.

VANESSA: [Laughing] For those of you who obviously couldn't see it, the entire cover is just one woman's face.

EMMA: Yeah. [Laughing]

VANESSA: It is just a closeup of a woman's face.

EMMA: Yep. And you know at the time, we had a lot of – a lot of conversations about what you were just saying about your book, where I was like "Oh, I get it," like it was a lot of me like newly understanding how it was gonna go. Maybe writers who write specifically in a certain genre, they probably have a clearer idea of how their books are going to be perceived and read, but I think if you're – if you're writing sort of literary fiction, or you're like "I'm writing *A Novel*," you really don't know how people are gonna

read it until you fork it over. And I mean, I love my book jackets, and I think that they suit me personally, and I think they suit my books. And I do sometimes feel like my books, because they look a certain way, that sometimes people don't really consider what's inside them the same way. Like, *Modern Lovers* got 4-starred reviews and like y'know Michiko Kakutani wrote me this like glowing review that I wanted – like y'know tattooed on my forehead.

VANESSA: Yup.

EMMA: And still, it's like [high-pitched voice] summer beach reads! You know, and I'm like "okay, fine, you know, yes, it is, like, it's fun, and –"

VANESSA: "Thank you, but also winter fireplace reads."

EMMA: Right. You know I do sometimes feel that because my books are colorful, and look like a good time, that people don't take them seriously, which makes me mad. And that -- you know, some of that definitely does have to do with the book jackets, but then again from the bookstore side of it, I can tell you a thousand percent that more women buy books than men, and that book covers are really important. And really do sell it. And like, you know I feel like I'm in this funny zone where like, I don't go to that website that starts with an A and ends with an N, I don't go there, 'cause it's the bad bad place, but I did end up there somehow fairly recently, and the like top review for *All Adults Here*, it was a 1 star review, and it said "This book has cursing and gay marriage."

VANESSA: [Gasps dramatically]

EMMA: [Laughing] And I was like, "Yeah."

VANESSA: True.

EMMA: True. Both. But I do think that y'know part of the rub of having sort of candy colored books that are, you know, being marketed toward like let's just really overgeneralize here and say like you know middle aged moms in book clubs.

VANESSA: Me.

EMMA: Right. And me too. But that like there's a lot of stuff in my books that, depending on what those moms in those book clubs are like, that they might leave me a 1-star review, and be like "Gay marriage." I mean there's gay marriage in All Adults Here, there's gay marriage in Modern Lovers, there's gay marriage in The Vacationers, I don't think there's any gay ma— there are gay people but no gay marriage in Laura Lamont. So yeah that's like like four for — four for five of my books has gay marriage. [Emma and Vanessa laugh] Yeah.

VANESSA: That's a pretty good-- that's a B-minus. That's pretty good.

EMMA: Yeah. But yeah, I mean I think that there are some women writers who have escaped this.

VANESSA: But they're few.

EMMA: But they are few and I mean I have to assume that it is pure tenacity on the part of those writers that keeps it thus.

VANESSA: For those of you who haven't, the Jennifer Weiner op-ed on this that came out a few years ago is just fantastic.

EMMA: Yeah.

VANESSA: And like, I actually don't hate Jonathan Franzen, but like whenever you look at Freedom, and you look at the cover of one of her books, and then you read the insides of both, and then you're like "Oh, these are completely similar."

EMMA: Yeah.

VANESSA: Like the covers are just mind-boggling. [Pause] I'm wondering about you as a bookstore owner. So you own this amazing bookshop, Books are Magic, in Brooklyn. And I'm wondering, do you have a Romance section?

EMMA: We do!

VANESSA: God bless you.

EMMA: We do, and you know it's interesting, whenever we add a new section, it's hard to figure out exactly what should live in it. You know we added like a True Crime section, we added like a Science and Nature section, we added an LGBTQ section. Like sometimes you're like, "Okay, but this book could go in like four different places in the store—"

VANESSA: Right.

EMMA: "—So where do we put it?"

VANESSA: Your book could go in a least three different places.

EMMA: Right. Yeah, but with romance, when we started to build it, we were like "Yeah like Jane Eyre? What goes in there? Does Pride & Prejudice go in there? Like who goes in there?"

VANESSA: Right.

EMMA: But I think what we've come to is that like you want to put the book primarily in the place where someone is gonna look for it first, right?

VANESSA: Right.

EMMA: That it's not about us putting labels on things, it's about us helping people find something in the store. So now our Romance section is y'know, newly published books that are categorized as romance. And it started really because we had some booksellers who were romance readers. Like, I don't think I read a romance novel, I mean aside from when I was like twelve, and like very curious. Um, I didn't read romance until a couple of years ago, and I had gotten to know like Bea and Leah [SPELLING] who run The Ripped Bodice, and like—

VANESSA: Mhmm.

EMMA: All of a sudden I had friends who were reading romance novels, and I was like "Oh I guess I need to read some romance novels and see what's what." And of course they're fabulous! So now, you know, I'm one of our romance readers at the store. But yeah, we didn't have a romance section until that,

which is often how things go at the bookstore. We had a good poetry section, but then you know, you have more poets on staff and your poetry section gets a lot better [Vanessa laughs] and you know like now we have a translated literature section because we have a bunch of people who really love to read books in translation. So I think of the romance section as something like that, where it's something that sort of grew organically.

VANESSA: So one of the definitions, as I'm sure you know, of the romance novel is the HEA: the Happily Ever After. And you write fantastic endings [Emma laughs]. I mean like [emphasizes] like really. And I'm wondering how you think, cuz they're not Happily Ever After, they are like [pauses] Compromisedly [Emma laughs] peaceful ever after. I'm wondering how you think about the endings of your books, without spoiling them.

EMMA: I mean I guess my HEA is more like "Hopeful Ever After."

VANESSA: Yeah.

EMMA: You know that like my books are optimistic, I think. They are full of like y'know real relationships and complicated feelings and you know not everything is perfect, but I do -- I guess my feeling about novels is that you can end something at any point. Unless you're writing a book about the apocalypse, and then it's like "Now we're all dead. The End." You know, unless that happens, like you know the presumption is that life goes on. My dad is a novelist and he writes very different kinds of books than I do, his books have a lot of you know serial killers and murder and abuse and lots of stuff.

VANESSA: That whole thing.

EMMA: [laughing] That whole thing. And he makes fun of me for my hopeful endings. But I just can't help it. Like, my feeling is that you can end a book anywhere, you know? The story could be finished at a different point, but like I just like that little – boop!

VANESSA: Uplift.

EMMA: I do.

VANESSA: Yeah.

EMMA: It's really like I really I can't help it.

VANESSA: [Laughs] I'm addicted to it!

EMMA: I really am! I mean like you know it's funny, so I just finished a draft of a new novel.

VANESSA: Congratulations!

EMMA: Thanks. Thanks. And it's a very different kind of novel than-- than I've written before, and yet, it's still true. I would say it's like sadder than my previous books, except maybe Laura Lamont which is as of right now, Laura Lamont is the outlier because it's historical, and all my other books are contemporary. And when I was writing that one, actually, when I finished it, I said to my dad "Dad, like I am just like killing so many people in this book, you're gonna love it." And he said to me "Emma. Are you killing them? Or are they just dying?" [Laughs]

VANESSA: "Sorry Dad, I'm not murdering them."

EMMA: "They're dying! They're just dying!" Um... yeah. [Laughs]

VANESSA: Can I posit a theory to you about the endings of your books?

EMMA: Yeah. Please.

VANESSA: Something that I see as consistent across the three novels of yours that I have read, is that you believe that people can misunderstand each other, and that the hopeful endings are about people figuring out how to reconnect with one another. And that to me just seems true. [Emma laughs] And like even if you ended the books on the next misunderstanding and the next moment of isolation and feeling as though you're lonely and don't want to connect with somebody, as long as you go through that moment of reconnection at some point, like, that's still hopeful, right?

EMMA: Yeah.

VANESSA: People find each other again. And people do feel connected again. That seems to me a fact of life that people misunderstanding each other—

EMMA: Yeah.

VANESSA: --and then find each other again.

EMMA: I hope so.

VANESSA: So that is how I read your books.

EMMA: Yeah. Well I thank you, I think that's a very nice way to read them. And I hope that that's true, you know? And I think that you know if you look at your life and all of your relationships, there will be ones where you feel at different points of that continuum, of like –

VANESSA: Right.

EMMA: [Sighs] Like satisfied reconnection, to like hopeless “Oh god, this thing is lost forever.” You know whether it's a romantic relationship or a platonic relationship or a familial relationship, whatever. So I think that writing is—I mean in some ways people have a choice, right? What they write. But in other ways also I really don't think so. Like I think that I could try to write a book with murder, you know? But [laughing] ultimately it would still be that. It would still be me like trying to understand the world through that. [Laugh]

VANESSA: Right. And you do have some relationships that feel finally ended, right? It's like “This relationship is bad for both of us, we should not be in contact with each other.” But even those it feels like that allows somebody to reconnect with somebody else, right? These ecosystems are complicated, and-- but I believe in the human capacity to connect, so I don't think that they are overly hopeful, but.

EMMA: [Laughs] Thank you Vanessa.

VANESSA: [Laughing] Yeah. And my opinion matters as much as Michiko Kakutani, so –

EMMA: For sure!

VANESSA: You're welcome. I know.

EMMA: For sure. How many listeners does she have to her podcast?

VANESSA: [Laughs] Yeah!

EMMA: Zero! [Pause] I don't think she has a podcast.

VANESSA: [Pause] You write a lot across race and gender and sexuality, and I'm wondering how you feel about doing that responsibly. What that means to you.

EMMA: Yeah, yeah. I have written about so many characters who are different from me in so many ways, but I would say that all of my characters always have more in common with me than they don't. I mean you know it's funny, I think the older that I get, the more responsibility I feel. I think that that's in part me understanding more that I have an audience, and that I want to [laughs] I want to make sure that what I'm putting out into the world is – is authentic.

VANESSA: Yeah.

EMMA: And not harmful. And in addition to being pleasurable and you know moving or whatever else my goals are, that those are also on there. But I will also say that most of the time I don't worry about it very often, or I hadn't worried about it very often until I had this trans kid character in this most recent book. And that I really really worried about. I mean to me, writing about adults, sexuality, you know, those are things that I understand, but I am a cisgendered middle-aged woman.

VANESSA: Mhmm.

EMMA: And, so I knew that I had to just really try my best to do it right. You know I had some trans friends read what I was writing. I watched a lot a lot of really good videos on like Tumblr and YouTube of kids coming out, and – goddamn, I mean I hope that all generations feel this way, and I think they do, like I think this is part of getting older. I hope, if you're paying attention, you know, is that you look at the people younger than you and you see all of the ways that they are doing things so much better.

VANESSA: I know, its my favorite part about getting older. [Laughing]

EMMA: It is!

VANESSA: Like what are you doing as a K-Pop Fandom! [Emma laughs]. That's incredible! What??

EMMA: Seriously! I know, like, we, like new kids on the block fans –

VANESSA: [Laughing] I was gonna make the same comment.

EMMA: Yeah.

VANESSA: Like we all had matching pajamas, as one another. [Emma laughs] And that is like where it stopped.

EMMA: Yeah. We never rose up as an army.

VANESSA: Nope.

EMMA: To do good in the world, or to battle evil.

VANESSA: Or to solve climate change.

EMMA: Right! But that's the thing, right? That is exactly it. That now teenagers and people in their twenties to me seem like superheroes.

VANESSA: Yeah.

EMMA: And at the bookstore, you know, my husband and I are in our forties, we have one manager who is also in their forties, but everyone else is in their twenties or just over the hump into their thirties. And I mean owning the bookstore has changed my life in a lot of ways, but one of the most meaningful ways to me as a person is that I have spent so much time with people in their twenties.

VANESSA: Yeah.

EMMA: Which I hadn't since I was in my twenties, really. And just to see up close how these smart amazing young people just like how they think about gender, how they talk about gender, how they talk about sexuality, it feels almost like I got new glasses. You know what I mean?

VANESSA: Mhmm, totally.

EMMA: That make me see things more clearly.

VANESSA: I lived in college dorms throughout most of my thirties as what the school called Proctors, and so I lived with 18-year olds. So, you know, it's that Matthew McConaughey joke, where I get older [Emma laughs] but they stay the same age. And they did. It was just such a gift. I was at Harvard, but the best education that I got was definitely from the students.

EMMA: Yeah.

VANESSA: The 18-year olds teaching me up.

EMMA: Yeah.

VANESSA: It sounds so lame but it is like absolutely true.

EMMA: No! I think it doesn't sound lame, like, I think that the place where adults get in trouble is when they don't believe that that's how things happen. You know?

VANESSA: Right.

EMMA: I think there are a lot of [quieter voice] let's just say men – [Vanessa laughs] but also people, in the world, you know, who looks at the way things have changed and says like [deeper voice] "Ugh, that's not how they did it in my day," You know?

VANESSA: Right.

EMMA: But I think that for those of us who want to keep evolving and keep improving, that's the way to do it.

VANESSA: Yeah. [Pause] So the first season of Hot and Bothered was all about encouraging people to write romance novels as a spiritual practice, like really as an act of self-care. And I'm wondering, as a writer, do you feel as though writing can be an act of self-care? And what relationship do you have to writing? Obviously it's more complicated for you.

EMMA: Well, I mean it's complicated in that like I get paid to do it, and I don't get paid if I don't do it, so –

VANESSA: Right.

EMMA: There's that. But yes! Like, this year I was home alone with my children from March until like September, basically. Because my husband was at the bookstore all day every day, like, y'know for 10 hours a day, and obviously it wasn't safe to have childcare, so it was just me and the kids for months and months and months and months and months, and so I mean not only could I not like write fiction, but I couldn't, like, see straight.

VANESSA: Shower?

EMMA: You know? Yeah. And I really missed it. I really missed it. And so as soon as we were able to have some childcare, and he was able to be at the bookstore less, because our whole staff was able to be back, and then school, like y'know they were in school at least one of them was in school all of the time and the other was in school some of the time, you know? The fabric of life has been sewn back together a little bit and I was so happy to get back to work.

VANESSA: Yeah.

EMMA: Like, it was [pause] amazing. And it felt sort of like it feels to read a book, you know? Like it felt like I can go to this [laughing] other place, I can escape this room that I've been in nonstop and I can be in these other rooms, and I can be with these other people, and I can make things happen, and I can just think about these other relationships, you know? And – ugh, god, it was so nice. So yes, I one hundred percent subscribe to your belief system that writing – just writing anything is self-care. Like it doesn't have to be a romance novel, like it can be – it can be anything. Anything that gives you pleasure. Like man. Yes. Agree.

VANESSA: Well Emma thank you so much, it was such a pleasure. Everybody go buy Emma's book All Adults Here in paperback or in hardback, and buy any of her other books. They are [Emma laughs] HEA books! Even though they are not traditional romance novels. They are just hopefully ever after books. And go and browse the very browseable Books Are Magic website. It's a fantastic bookstore. I'm so excited to be able to travel again, and come back to Brooklyn, and go back to your bookstore. [Laughing]

EMMA: Yes, please do! Please do. And I think that like you know that is something that is possible now, that we were really missing for so many months is that like now you know writers do come and they sign their books and like they're able to have that moment where you like look at this stack of your books in a bookstore and that is meaningful and good.

VANESSA: I meant as a shopper. But. Yes. As an author too.

EMMA: Well yeah okay, that too, you can also buy things after you sign a stack of your books.

VANESSA: Thank you so much, you're just so generous and wonderful, and you've kept me a lot of company over the years, so thank you.

[Theme music begins]

VANESSA: This episode of Hot and Bothered was executive produced by Arianna Nettleman. We of course want to give a special thanks this week to Emma Straub, and this week's episode of Hot and Bothered is edited by Molly Baxter. Thank you so much everybody and we will talk to you in a few weeks.

[Theme music continues, then fades]

[AD CONTENT]

Hello beautiful! I am Amy Eric, founder of Madison Read, a hair color company I named after my daughter. Experience gorgeous lasting high quality hair color made with ingredients you can feel good about, with consistent results every time. It's easy to find your perfect shade. Book a complimentary video hair color consultation with a licensed colorist on Madison-read.com and get 10% off plus free shipping on your first color kit. Use code RADIO10. That's code RADIO10.

