Vanessa: I’m Vanessa Zoltan -

Brea: I’m Brea Grant -

Mallory: - and I’m Mallory O’Meara -

Vanessa: - and this is The Women of Harry Potter and the Sacred Text. This week we are lucky enough to be joined by two wonderful women who co-host the Reading Glasses Podcast, which I was lucky enough to be on, and then Brea and Mallory, do you mind just introducing yourselves by name, so that we can get used to whose voice is who’s, and what each of you do, other than Reading Glasses.

Brea: Yeah, ah, we both sound alike so.... good luck telling us apart!! Um, this is Brea, and I am a filmmaker, an actress, and yeah, co-host Reading Glasses, dog owner, snacker, I have a lot of things that I do.

Mallory: I’m Mallory O’Meara, I am a filmmaker, an author, and the other half of Reading Glasses, I read a lot of books and I have a lot of cats, and I don’t like snacks, but I do like bourbon.

Vanessa: Well ladies, we put you to an impossible task: Two people, only one woman from Harry Potter that you can bless. Who have you decided to bless, and why?

Mallory: The woman of Harry Potter that we’ve decided to bless today can totally take the burden of two podcasters, she can take the burden of all of Hogwarts, we’re blessing Professor McGonagall.

Vanessa: Ahh, Minerva. I love her. So what is something about Minerva that you feel as though really needs to be lifted up for the world?

Brea: We just felt like she has major boss lady energy. She just is sort of a boss which is -

Mallory: - which we really need in 2019.

Brea: We need more bosses, and Mallory and I are both people’s bosses, and I always tell people that I am, the reason I am a film director is ‘cause I’m bossy and I think that that’s like a really, I think it’s a good thing. It’s good to have lady bosses, and that’s sort of what she is, she’s just, she’s good at her job.

Mallory: Yes, she’s - so I think Professor McGonagall is like the living embodiment of leaning in, you know, she’s strong, she’s accountable, she’s responsible, she’s resilient, she’s a career woman, she’s very focussed, she also takes care of herself, she’s Dumbledore’s right-hand witch, she handles Gryffindor, she’s
a member of the Order of the Phoenix, she led the charge at the Battle of Hogwarts, and she runs Hogwarts. Like she’s got her stuff together, she handles things.

Brea: Yeah, and she’s also really great because I like her ‘cause she is a rule-follower to a certain extent, but she doesn’t let like the bureaucracy of it all get her down, which I think is good. Like, she knows when to let people slide by, and she knows when to be on the right side of history, which I think is really important because I’m sort of a rule follower, but I know when there are times to break rules, and I think she knows that as well which makes me look up to her.

Vanessa: You know, a long time fictional love affair in my heart is between McGonagall and Lee Jordan. You know, Lee whenever he’s announcing one of the quidditch games, he likes always does some sort of over-editorialising saying inappropriate things about non-Gryffindor players, and McGonagall’s always like Jordan, you know, do better! But she like clearly loves it, because she never actually fires him, right? She’s so good at threading this needle between rule follower and not, she even knows how to perform it, right? Like there are actions she could take to make Lee Jordan stop doing what he does, but she doesn’t, she’s just like yes, I secretly do always want Gryffindor to win.

Mallory: Well there’s so many situations like that where she’s always, like Brea said, she’s always on the right side of history, but there’s many many situations where like Harry and Ron and Hermione are gonna get in trouble and she’s, she acts so stern, but she’s the one who really lets them get away with it.

Vanessa: Yeah, I - do we feel like by the end of the books, that this is like pedagogically sound what she’s doing? I guess so, right, because she definitely lives up to the standards that she holds the kids to. Like she lets them get away with things and then she’s also the one who’s literally running down to Hagrid’s hut to protect Hagrid with her body. So it’s not like she’s letting the kids get away with dangerous things, but wouldn’t do the dangerous things herself, like she is very much willing to put her body on the line.

Mallory: Yeah, for sure, it’s - I really think it’s that like strength and reliability that makes her shine. Like you said, she has this performance of being like this stoic, detached, unemotional, rule-following person, but she’s always first in line, first on the battlefield if anything needs to be done.

Vanessa: Can you give me an example of a moment, like just a scene in which you’re like this is McGonagall being A+ McGonagall.

Mallory: There’s so many like amazing, bad, awesome McGonagall moments, like especially, you know, the one that everyone wants to go to is when she leads the battle, the charge of the Battle of Hogwarts, but the moment we actually wanna talk about is when she takes over as Headmistress during Dumbledore’s absence, when everything’s really going down. Nobody else can take that job, you know, and so McGonagall is just shoudering this massive, massive burden on top of all the emotional things that are going on and all the craziness that’s happening, she's the only one that can take over and take care of Hogwarts, take care of all the kids, while being in the Order of the Phoenix and while doing all these other
things, and she really to us embodies this like, idea that all us modern women are going towards, of like having it all and doing all these things and having all your stuff together, and being organised, and taking care of your stuff and everyone else’s stuff. If McGonagall was a Muggle, she would be like running a yoga studio, have five kids, like, you know she would, while also being the CEO of a company, like she has, she’s got it all, and she handles it.

Brea: Yeah, we were also talking about before we came on the air, this idea of the glass cliff, are you familiar with this, the glass cliff?

Vanessa: No.

Brea: Okay, so it's this term that people use, it’s like similar to the glass ceiling, but it’s the idea that women get promoted to positions of power, or are allowed to step into them when like basically things are going really poorly, so it's very hard for women to achieve or do well, because, for example, like a school system that’s doing poorly, they fire all the principals and then they bring in a female principal, and it’s a lot harder for women to achieve great things when they’re handed things that are already failing miserably.

Vanessa: I do remember that, with like that was a big thing with like the Pepsi CEO, right? Like it was, ‘Oh, we don’t know what to do, let’s bring in a woman’.

Brea: Yeah, it’s sort of this like last-ditch effort, that people are like let’s just try it and see what happens! And so women end up the CEO’s of failing businesses and failing institutions, and they have this on their records far more than men do because they’re brought in as, like, a last-ditch effort. Like, ‘Ahh, we’ve already tried all the men we know, let’s try a woman, let’s see what happens!’.

Mallory: But the thing that’s cool about McGonagall is that she really owns it. Like something I really love about her and I think is a great role model for women and girls reading Harry Potter today, is that she’s so powerful and she knows it, and she owns it, and she’s like unapologetically proud of herself and like the accomplishments that she’s done, and just how great of a witch she is.

Vanessa: Yeah, I’m wondering what you all make of the fact that, I mean, this is true of all the teachers at Hogwarts, not just McGonagall, you know, she’s a single woman, she’s almost like a nun, right? There is an essay that I read by Anne Patchett who’s talking about how she grew up going to Catholic School, and that she learned how to be a feminist because the only teachers she had were nuns. And like, none of the women leaders in her life were married or like ever prioritised a relationship with a man, and she was like well that’s how to be a badass woman. And so I’m just wondering if you think that it’s helpful that McGonagall sort of lives this monastic life, or if you think that that makes her a more difficult person for us to look up to.

Mallory: Oh, I think it makes her better, I love her, like I love this idea of McGonagall like in her plaid tartan jammies, like in her tower at Hogwarts, just like getting all of her stuff done, and like taking a bubble bath or something, and just like taking care of herself and focussing on herself. I think she, it’s such a source
of strength for her. I mean, I know she canonically, she is widowed, she was married before, she has had romantic interests, but her being such a career woman in this story is such a huge role model for me at least, I think it’s awesome.

Brea: And I think also this is like really plays into present day feminist discussions, right? I mean, I think particularly my sort of feminist generation looks to women about fifteen years older than me, and a lot of the major ones were just career women, like that was all they had the time for, you know? And I think that one of the things that feminism is really fighting for in all of these new waves, whatever wave we’re in now - fortieth? Millionth? Who could say? Umm, is that we are able to achieve things, we’re able to be headmistress, and also if you want a family or if you want a relationship, you want to marry a nice lady or something, then you are able to do those kinds of things. You can go and have - literally I think we’re all fighting to sort of have it all. I think it’s funny like now I think anytime I talk to women realistically we’re all like you can have it all, just maybe not all at the same time, you can have - I know my relationships fall apart while I’m directing a feature film, that’s just sort of what happens, and then I have to beg forgiveness when I come home.

Mallory: Yup, or you break up with your boyfriend while you’re on book tour.

Brea: Wow, this got personal!! Welcome to Reading Glasses.

Mallory and Brea: (laughs)

Brea: Ahh, I think as women it is sometimes you have to make these hard choices and, like Mallory said I mean I didn’t know this, I read this morning that she had been married before and stuff, but I think this is definitely a generational thing as well, and something that I love that this new generation of feminism is fighting for, where like to be you know, the President of the United States, or I was gonna say of a university because I think they have the power. But, United States, even, you could actually have a relationship outside of that. I think before that it was definitely like a big separation of personal versus private, and women were like not even allowed it, you know?

Mallory: I think McGonagall walked so Hermione could fly.

Vanessa: Ooh!

Mallory: But it is unfortunate she had to walk, that’s the problem.

Brea: Yes, yes.

Mallory: But she still is one powerful woman.
Vanessa: Well, and poor Hermione, she ends up married to Ron, so I don’t know who the big winner is actually in that.

Mallory/Brea: (laughs) Wow, wow!

Vanessa: We can talk about that another day, but the other thing you know, the comedian Michelle Wolf does like, a great job on this, she’s like, you know, she says that she doesn’t want to get married and have kids because she wants to have a career, and people are like ‘But woman, they can have it all’. And Michelle Wolf was like when have you ever left an all-you-can-eat buffet being like I just made a lot of really good choices.

Mallory: (laughs) That’s very funny.

Vanessa: Men haven’t had it all, men have had housewives, right? Like they haven’t been super involved in meaningful relationships at home, they’ve chosen between careers and the house, and so I actually think McGonagall’s a very realistic depiction of the sacrifices that you have to make to be a badass. And I even think she sort of plays her lack of maternal instincts for laughs, right? Like when she finds out that Harry against sort of her best direction is still fighting Umbridge, the ‘Have a biscuit, Potter’ moment is like the most maternal we ever see her, and it’s hysterical. And it’s from a tin, she clearly has not baked these biscuits herself.

Mallory: Well that’s what I love about her so much is that she is, you know, half of her is this very austere stern person, especially when we first meet her in like the first book. But she’s really funny and she doesn’t actually take herself that seriously, and even though she never had kids, like you could argue that she is so, she’s just as maternal as Molly Weasley, because she takes care of all of Hogwarts.

Vanessa: We just read this moment this past week where Harry is scared that Sirius is being tortured and it’s right before he like follows Sirius and the Death Eaters to the Department of Mysteries, and he runs to the hospital wing and asks Madam Pomfrey, like ‘Where’s Professor McGonagall?’’, she’s like ‘McGonagall’s gone’. That is what leads him to total collapse and panic. He’s like ‘Oh my god, McGonagall’s not here?’.

Brea: Yeah, I like that, and I think that it’s something that, I think it’s interesting to think of stability as a part of having maternal instincts. A part of being maternal is that stability. I mean, her not having children but being this stable force is something I really respect, and I think that often we associate things with being maternal sort of like the nurturing, the encouraging, but sometimes the way people learn is different, and the way people respond to things is very different, and in certain cases you just want that person who’s stable,
who follows the rules, who can tell you what the rules are, who can like explain them to you. I know being a lady in Hollywood that’s very helpful to have other women who can explain all of this to me.

Mallory: We need a McGonagall.

Brea: I know! But yeah yeah, I agree, I think it’s interesting to see her in that light.

Vanessa: Yes, have either of you read Elizabeth Gilbert’s book that she wrote after Eat Pray Love? I think it’s called Committed.

Mallory: I have.

Vanessa: Yes, that chapter, ‘Let’s hear it for the Aunties’.

Mallory: Yes, that is McGonagall in spades!

Vanessa: So, like Gilbert writes this amazing, you know, this amazing chapter, like there are all sorts of reasons not to have children, and we need to stop honoring women and basically giving them authority as real grown ups and as real bosses only if they have children of their own. Like being an Auntie is really important, and just, there are all sorts of reasons to not have your own biological children, you know, she has completely stepped into authority, she’s having a positive impact on kids, and like you do not need biological children in order to be a full woman.

Mallory: Yeah, I don’t think anybody’s looking at McGonagall and looking and thinking that she has an incomplete or an unfulfilling life, like she has this incredible career and she runs the most important wizard school in the world, she takes care of all these kids, and she’s so accomplished, and she just - again I have this amazing image of her with a goblet of wine, in her tartan pyjamas, in her turret, just like being so satisfied and fulfilled with her life, and I don’t think anyone’s looking at McGonagall and like feeling pity for her, or thinking that she’s an incomplete person.

Vanessa: I mean like I know that I feel this anxiety, right? You can be too maternal as a woman, or you can be not maternal enough, and I think that we see that a lot in the way that all these women are running for president right now, right, like so few of the men have in their Twitter description ‘dad’, but the women who are moms have it in their Twitter bio’s, right? There’s this pressure as a woman to put yourself in relationship with kids, and I love the way that McGonagall is showing us that you don’t have to be a biological mom in order to have a meaningful relationship with children, and slash be like basically the colonel of an army in uprising.

Mallory: Yeah, she’s super badass, that’s the cool thing. I think we are especially when Harry Potter came out, we were all very very sorely lacking in non-sexualised badass female protagonists, so seeing McGonagall like in her heavy plaid robes and just being super badass without being a mid-20’s, busty
young girl, like it was so cool to see that. I mean, she just shines at the Battle of Hogwarts, she’s so cool, so powerful, and so cute too, you can tell she’s kind of excited to show off how powerful she truly is, and to see like an older unsexualised woman in that role was so cool for me as a kid.

Vanessa: Women don’t have to be perfect to be great, yup. Okay, so as you all know, we always end with an educational game. So I’ve created a game that we will call ‘Trivia about Woman in Tartan’. So, I have four questions for you, I have made them multiple choice, I’ve learned all of this from an article on Buzzfeed, and the article is called ‘15 Amazing Scottish Women to Name Your Daughters After’. I’m very excited to mispronounce a lot of Scottish names right now, but it was so fun to go down a rabbit hole and learn about some of these women.

Okay, so Question One: Winifred, Countess of Nithsdale, who lived from 1680-1749, is famous for sneaking her husband out of jail. She did this by:

a) sleeping with a guard,
b) putting her husband in women’s clothes,
c) murdering the guards, or
d) hiring prostitutes to distract the guards.

Mallory: I’m gonna say b.

Vanessa: b is correct! She did, she convinced the guards to let her in to visit her husband, brought extra clothes for him to dress as a woman, and the two of them just walked out together.

Brea: Wow.


Question Two, what decade did Mary Somerville help discover Neptune? Was it the 1640’s, the 1740’s, the 1840’s, or the 1940’s?

Brea: Ahh, my brain, do you know this? Oh, you think 1840’s? I think it’s too late.

Mallory: Alright, well stick with your gut.

Brea: Alright, I’m gonna go B also, 1740’s. Mmm, I hope I’m not wrong!!

Vanessa: It was the 1840’s.

Brea: Dammit!!
Vanessa: It’s a crappy question, I just wanted to tell you about how awesome this woman was. It’s just an excuse.

Mallory: That’s okay.

Brea: Mallory was right, Mallory was right.

Vanessa: I don’t know why like anyone should really know this. This woman was so cool, she was one of the first two females to be elected to the Royal Astronomical Society, and she was the first woman to have a College at Oxford named after her. She was just like so freaking cool, and, yeah, anyway, I only asked that question as an excuse to tell the world about Mary Somerville.

In 1897 what nonsense did men get up to in order to try to prevent the first women medical students in Scotland from taking their final exam? Did they:

a) release chickens in the exam room,
b) release sheep in the exam room,
c) lace the ladies tea with whiskey, or
d) shoot loud guns outside of the classroom.

Brea: I know all about this incident but I don’t know why I don’t know the answer to this question, it's either, I think it’s d.

Vanessa: It is b, they released sheep in the classroom. Why do you know all about this incident, nerd?

Brea: I read something about these women medical students.

Vanessa: Well, these women were frickin’ incredible, there were six of them and they all decided that they were going to go to med school in Scotland, and the men were just like so upset that they made it to final exams that they released a sheep in the exam room.

Mallory: If listeners want to learn more about that you can check out Girl Squads by Sam Maggs, which is a non-fiction book about groups of women who were, did great things and were really good friends with each other.

Vanessa: That’s awesome, I am gonna pick that up.

Okay, so the last question is about a woman named Fanny Wright. Fanny Wright lived from 1795 to 1852, and she was freakin incredible. She travelled to America in 1818, and then in 1824, during her second visit, she got really involved in the abolitionist movement, and so she bought a 640 acre tract of land, she called it Nishoba, bought all the slaves that she could, freed them, and gave them land. So my question is, which state is Nishoba in? And your options are:
a) Oklahoma,
b) New York,
c) Tennessee, or
d) Georgia.

Brea: Ahh, I don’t know, I’m gonna go, I’m gonna say Tennessee. I’m gonna say Tennessee.

Vanessa: You’re right!

Brea: Alright!! That Master’s degree counted for something.

Vanessa: Well, and what’s sad is that like we don’t teach these as part of our Master’s in American History, like that’s not on you.

Brea: Nah, it’s a little on me, I designed my own courses.

Vanessa: Well, Brea and Mallory, thank you so much for blessing the wonderful Minerva McGonagall with us, it was a real pleasure, and everybody should go and check out your podcast Reading Glasses. There’s a very special episode with a woman named Vanessa Zoltan where you guys finally get around to talking about Harry Potter.

Brea: We loved it.

Vanessa: Mallory, while we have you on the line, you have a new book out.

Mallory: I do, I wrote a book that just came out in March called ‘The Lady from the Black Lagoon: Hollywood Monsters and the Lost Legacy of Millicent Patrick,’ it’s a biography of the woman who designed the creature from the Black Lagoon.

Vanessa: That’s so cool, I haven’t read it yet, but I have it sitting by my bed, so I’m very excited.

Mallory: Thank you for getting it.

Vanessa: And just thank you both so much I know you’re both busy being bosses and like, we really appreciate you taking the time to come and talk to us.

Mallory: Thank you so much for having us.

Vanessa: So this has been an episode of the Women of Harry Potter and the Sacred Text. This is a Not Sorry Production, executive produced by Ariana Nedelman and me, Vanessa Zoltan, with editing support from Chelsea Ursin, and we are part of Nightvale Presents.