

Material Girls Season 1, Episode 6: Bridgerton X Reading the Romance with Vanessa Zoltan

SPEAKERS

Vanessa Zoltan, Hannah McGregor, Marcelle Kosman

Marcelle Kosman 00:00

Hey folks. Today's episode is all about Bridgerton. We talk about the books a bit, but largely focus on the TV adaptation. If you want to avoid spoilers skip this episode. We also want to give you a content warning. In the last 20 minutes of the episode, in the final segment, we talk in depth about depictions of sexual assault and non-consent more broadly. You can listen to Hannah's thesis in the final segment and then turn off the episode if you'd rather not hear that part of the conversation. Take care of yourselves.

[Material Girls Theme plays: "Shopping Mall" by Jay Arner and Jessica Delisle]

Hannah McGregor 01:03

Hello, and welcome to *Material Girls*, a scholarly podcast about popular culture. I'm Hannah McGregor.

Marcelle Kosman 01:10

And I'm Marcelle Kosman. And for this episode, we have a very special guest, you know and love her as the host of *Harry Potter and the Sacred Text*, *Hot and Bothered* and *Should I Quit*, and as the author of *Praying with Jane Eyre*, it's Vanessa Zoltan! **[Hannah and Marcelle make air horn noises]**

Vanessa Zoltan 01:35

Thanks for making this podcast just for me. It like hits every pleasure center in my brain. **[Marcelle laughs]**

Hannah McGregor 01:42

Yeah, it is just for you. I have so many questions about your relationship to romance and romance novels and romance reading. But I actually just want to start things off by asking a little bit about your own personal fictional crushes. Vanessa, who's your top fictional crush right now?

Vanessa Zoltan 02:05

Right now? I am just finishing my reread of *Emma* by Jane Austen. Have not read *Emma*, half a lifetime ago. I read it when I was 20. I'm now 41. And here's the thing. I would not want to be in a relationship with Mr. Knightley. But he hits like every kink I have. **[Hannah and Marcelle laugh]**

Hannah McGregor 02:27

Daddy?

Vanessa Zoltan 02:28

Yes. Like older wiser wants me to be the best version of myself, is always out there like doing sacrificial things. But as soon as someone is like you're sacrificing yourself, he literally rides off on a horse in the middle of a conversation. If you're thanking him for something, he's like, I don't want to hear it. **[Hannah and Marcelle laugh]**

Hannah McGregor 02:46

Oh my god, I love that one of your kinks is "rides off on a horse in the middle of a conversation."

Vanessa Zoltan 02:51

In the middle of a compliment! He's just like, my ego was all set. I don't need you to kiss my ass. It's not the middle of a conversation. It's the middle of a compliment.

Hannah McGregor 03:01

Oh, it's important for clarification.

Vanessa Zoltan 03:03

I love it so much. Okay, but in order to honor my full sexual identity, I also have to talk about how we are watching and rewatching Paddington 1 and 2 a lot in my house right now.

Hannah McGregor 03:15

You have a young child.

Vanessa Zoltan 03:18

She's not that young. They are 10 and 15. They are so wholesome. Anyway, Mrs. Brown, played by Sally Hawkins in these films, is like an artistic genius who is willing to get up to shenanigans. And like brings a refugee into her house because it's the right thing to do. She draws on the walls. Her fashion? She wears so many colors. I love her.

Hannah McGregor 03:48

I actually do feel like stern daddy plus chaotic whimsical women, like, that is your life. **[Vanessa laughs]**

Vanessa Zoltan 04:01

Hannah, for those of you listening, just spent like five days with me and my husband. So, this is an informed joke.

Hannah McGregor 04:09

You know what? It's a truth-based joke, and it's my favorite kind.

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

Marcelle Kosman 04:14

Hannah, you already know this. But for your sake, Vanessa, we're going to explain our segments as we go, starting with this one. "Why this? Why now?" So, in this segment, we theorize why a particular piece of pop culture became Zeitgeist-y in a particular historical moment.

Hannah McGregor 04:35

Yeah. And today we are going to talk about Bridgerton. Specifically the Netflix adaptation of Bridgerton. So, Vanessa, Marcelle, to start off, I want to hear a little bit about your relationships with Bridgerton, the Netflix series. And I also want to know whether you were romance readers prior to watching it or have become romance readers since. Tell me about how you feel about romance.

Marcelle Kosman 05:05

Vanessa, I would love it if you went first.

Vanessa Zoltan 05:07

I'm happy to. So, depending on what we define as romance novels, right? Like, I loved *Jane Eyre* and Jane Austen, in high school and college. But I don't feel like that's quite what we mean by romance novels, even though those are canonically romance novels. I became a big romance reader in November of 2016. If you had asked me, Did you start reading romance novels because Donald Trump was elected, it did not occur to me that that is what was happening.

Hannah McGregor 05:39

You would have been like, coincidence.

Vanessa Zoltan 05:41

Yeah, absolutely did not occur to me. A friend of mine, Emmy, had sent me this book that she loved. She sent it to me on my e-reader called *The Duke and I* by Julia Quinn, it sat on my e-reader for literal years. And I was like trying to read, I was just very distracted and couldn't read. And so I was like, fine, I'll open the stupid book that is clearly beneath me. But like, that's where I am. And like, came up for air six hours later, and was like, that was stupid. But I do want to read the next one. And then it took me a really long time to just accept that I was a romance reader. I finished the eight *Bridgertons* books. And then I was like, they mentioned the Smythe-Smith's in the *Bridgerton* books. I should probably read the four Smythe-Smith books. And then I was like-

Hannah McGregor 06:32

Just to check.

Vanessa Zoltan 06:33

-just to check what's going on. And then I'll be a Julia Quinn completist. But she's probably the only good romance writer.

Hannah McGregor 06:39

Yeah, probably other smart people agree that this is the one that you can read and still be smart.

Vanessa Zoltan 06:44

Exactly. And then eventually, I was just like, Nope, these are amazing, and I love them. And then, can I make my major *Bridgerton* flex now?

Hannah McGregor 06:54

Yeah. Yeah. You simply must.

Vanessa Zoltan 06:57

I decided with my partner in crime, Ariana Nedelman, to make a podcast about romance novels. And so we blindly wrote to Julia Quinn one night, being like, hey, you lived in the same dorm where I'm now a dorm mom, do you want to be on our podcast? And she said, Yes. And then we went to dinner with her because I happened to be in Seattle where she lives. And she was like, Do you guys want to know a secret? And we were like, Yes. And she was like, Shonda Rhimes just picked up the *Bridgerton* series.

Marcelle Kosman 07:24

Oh, my God.

Vanessa Zoltan 07:25

And I was like, what? And she was like, You can't tell anyone. So I like that's how original, like, at the ground floor of *Bridgerton* I was. I knew before it was public, y'all.

Marcelle Kosman 07:38

This is an incredible combination of being both a hipster and public romance reader.

Hannah McGregor 07:48

Yeah. Vanessa, I just love secrets. Even now that it's not a secret anymore, I love knowing that that secret was gifted to you. And I love knowing that just, knowing you, you kept it.

Vanessa Zoltan 08:04

[Vanessa laughs] I did. And I gotta say, Julia Quinn and I bonded because like, the reason she trusted me with the secret is like we were both like dorky Jewish women who were like talking about which synagogues our families went to in the San Fernando Valley, right? It wasn't like Julia Quinn is awesome. She's not cool in the same way that I'm not cool. Right? And so this was like bonding over- We were in an Indian restaurant saying to the waiter, no, very mild. We can't handle any spice, because we were sharing the secret. **[Hannah and Marcelle laugh]**

Hannah McGregor 08:36

No, very mild. Imagine we're from a people where the spice is dill. Mild. Sorry, and onion, I take it back. **[All three laugh]**

Vanessa Zoltan 08:49

Yeah. Salt only. So that is where this super hot Goss came to me, everyone.

Marcelle Kosman 08:54

I love it.

Vanessa Zoltan 0:55

But that's my romance reading. It really started out of a place of desperation and trauma of not being able to read what I thought of at the time as real books. And so like desperately plunging on this thing that has now become just like such a big part of my life.

Hannah McGregor 09:10

Yeah, that is really beautiful. Marcelle, I don't think you read romance novels. But I think you've watched *Bridgerton*.

Marcelle Kosman 09:16

I did watch *Bridgerton*. I have consumed a few romance novels. And I do- you know this about me, Hannah- I love love.

Hannah McGregor 09:25

Marcelle loves love.

Marcelle Kosman 09:26

I love love. And so my not reading romance novels doesn't come from a place of snark. It might have at one time, but it's more just that I feel like as a genre, it's really really, I don't know where to start is-

Hannah McGregor 09:46

Oh Marcelle but Oh, no, no, no. Her DM's will simply be ruined.

Marcelle Kosman 09:53

I know. [Marcelle laughs] Let me clarify. So some romance novels that I have read include all of the *Outlander* series books.

Vanessa Zoltan 10:01

Oh, Diana Gabaldon would be very upset with you. She says that these are not technically romance novels.

Marcelle Kosman 10:06

Yeah, well, that's extremely silly. She hasn't read her own books.

Vanessa Zoltan 10:09

They are romantic novels.

Hannah McGregor 10:12

They are romantic novels. I actually kind of agree that they're not romance novels, but they are-

Vanessa Zoltan 10:16

Yeah, they're historical romantic novels. They're not romance novels. I love them.

Hannah McGregor 10:20

They're gateway romances. But Marcelle, the difference, the really key difference is that romance guarantees happily ever after at the end of the book.

Vanessa Zoltan 10:27

Whereas, end of *Outlander 2*. [*Vanessa sighs deeply*]

Marcelle Kosman 10:32

Okay. I know.

Vanessa Zoltan 10:33

Want me to quote it right now?

Marcelle Kosman 10:35

No.

Hannah McGregor 10:36

And everytime you think it's gonna work out for them, another war!

Marcelle Kosman 10:38

I know. Okay. Understood.

Hannah McGregor 10:40

Okay. But I want to talk about what happened somewhere around, you know, 2020 to make this like, really widely disparaged sort of women-only book genre, something that, you know, could afford this kind of multimillion dollar adaptation. So we're gonna do a little bit of historical context here. And then we'll get into some theory. So Julia Quinn published the *Bridgerton* books between 2000-2006. The TV adaptation was released in 2020. So we've got like, about a lag of about 20 years in between for this to go from something a friend sends you on Kindle that you refuse to read to something that 82 million people watched, which is how many people watched the first season, which set a record for being the most viewed Netflix original series, until that record was broken by season two of *Bridgerton*.

Marcelle Kosman 11:44

You know, that's more people than the entire nation state called Canada. That's like, that's like twice, almost three times, not quite three times. But it's like more than twice as many people as the entire country.

Hannah McGregor 11:58

Incredible that you know how many people there are in Canada. [Vanessa laughs] Okay, so I am really curious for us to sort of collectively think through in this episode, what happened between 2000 and 2020 to facilitate this kind of shift of romance from something that women read, often in private, often with some attendant feelings of shame, to prestige television, because *Bridgerton* is not just popular, it has won awards.

Vanessa Zoltan 12:27

I was just at a wedding where the bride walked down the aisle to the score from *Bridgerton*.

Hannah McGregor 12:33

Incredible.

Marcelle Kosman 12:34

I love it.

Hannah McGregor 12:35

That is not a piece of culture that people are feeling ashamed of. That is like something people are publicly celebrating. You know, that in part comes with the prestige of a producer like Shonda Rhimes, comes with the prestige of Netflix, the prestige of just the budget. Right? Like this is serious culture, we can tell because it looks really good. Some of the things that predate this, I think we've got to look at adaptations that preceded it. For example, how successful the adaptation of *Outlander* was. *Outlander* is not textbook romance, because it doesn't have a happily ever after for the characters at the end of the book. And that is like the top genre requirement of romance if you're going to be shelved in the romance section. Those people have to be together and happy at the end of the book, and it's not gonna get fucked up in a future book. That is the promise that you have made.

Vanessa Zoltan 13:33

But part of the success of the adaptation of *Outlander* is that there are war scenes, right? And so it was a perfect gateway, because it's not really romance. There is such hot romance and sex, but you're like, whatever. I'm watching a war show about the Scottish Highlands. Right? It had a great cover.

Hannah McGregor 13:52

And like serious history. Yeah. I mean, I think that's part of why *Outlander* is a gateway into romance reading for a lot of readers.

Vanessa Zoltan 14:00

I agree. Yeah. Yeah, it was for me, right? I could have started my story in 2009 when I read *Outlander* and burnt out my friend's flashlight doing it.

Marcelle Kosman 14:10

But you're a purist.

Vanessa Zoltan 14:11

I'm a purist. I answered the question as asked. **[Hannah and Vanessa laugh]**

Marcelle Kosman 14:17

Okay, so I feel like HBO has really kind of shifted our expectations for the- you know what, I'm about to say a real truism. I feel like HBO has really shifted our expectations for prestige television, when they literally fucking defined it.

Hannah McGregor 14:34

Yeah, yeah, that's fair.

Marcelle Kosman 14:35

But one of the things that I think is really interesting is how much unbridled passion and sex is allowed in HBO shows. So like whether it's like *Sex in the City*, or like *Trueblood* or *Game of Thrones*, like all of these shows are like people have sex and people enjoy sex and we're going to show people enjoying having sex on television.

Hannah McGregor 15:03

Yeah. And that is definitely part of what primed viewers to watch romance adaptations, though, as we will discuss in the next segment, they had to tone the sex way down in *Bridgerton* for the adaptation. Yeah. So we've got, I think, two sort of interesting parallel histories because we can talk about sort of the prestige adaptations of romance novels and what shifts in the TV space to make that possible. And then I think we also need to talk about what's happening in the actual world of romance reading at the same time. Marcelle, you made a face like you thought of something.

Marcelle Kosman 15:41

I made a face because I just suddenly thought of *50 Shades of Grey*, because when we talked about this, I made the joke that *50 Shades of Grey* walked so that *Bridgerton* could run. But that is a funny joke, because there are many other things that walked so that *50 Shades* could run.

Vanessa Zoltan 15:54

I think that that's right. Other things are happening at this time, like technology, right? The reason that *50 Shades of Grey* was as successful as it was, is because of e-readers. Right? People weren't ashamed to read it, because you didn't know what they were reading, and so suddenly, you can privately read in public. You don't get *50 Shades of Grey* without that. And, you know, again, we can talk about how I read *50 Shades of Grey* long before I read *Bridgerton*. And the thing that blew my mind, but the first time I read *50 Shades of Grey*, I was like, Don't you understand what the actual fantasy is?

The actual fantasy is a guy who sends you a computer and sends the internet installation guy. Right? Like, it's not the sex. It's like, it's that a woman wrote a man. And so he doesn't just get her a car, he gets her an insurance policy, right? **[Marcelle laughs]** Like, yeah, and I was like, this is the hottest fucking thing I've ever read. And again, I wouldn't have read it if I didn't have my Kindle and couldn't have read it in private. And so the technology aspects of this, and like the multifaceted amazingness of this, I do think it's complicated how we got here.

Hannah McGregor 17:05

It's complicated. And the public private dimension is a thing I really want us to delve into more, because it's so interesting to think about this parallel of romance going public, in the form of adaptations, in the form of prestige literary coverage. So in 2018, Jamie Greene becomes the debut New York Times romance columnist, bringing romance into the public sphere of literary conversations in a way they never have been before. So we've got this conversation happening being like, don't be ashamed of reading Romance. Romance is real literature. Romance should be taken seriously. And then we've got the rise of e-readers and people just be in like, I'm reading smut on the train..

Vanessa Zoltan 17:51

And the change of romance covers, right? This is when romance covers go from the Fabio model, which obviously hasn't been Fabio for years.

Hannah McGregor 17:59

The de-Fabio-ification.

Vanessa Zoltan 18:01

Yeah, to cartoons.

Marcelle Kosman 18:03

Explain for me, because my relationship to romances is very limited.

Hannah McGregor 18:07

If we weren't on a timeline right now, I would go and physically get for you one of the first romance novels I ever owned, which has classic, just like incredible cover art. Fabio was literally that's his claim to fame.

Marcelle Kosman 18:22

Totally. I think I feel like those of us who have seen parodies of romance, like the open shirt and the muscles and the horse and the long hair and the wind. But what happened?

Vanessa Zoltan 18:33

So, then about seven years ago, yeah, they started doing these like very cute cartoon drawings. And *The Wedding Date* by Jasmine Guillory was the most prominent early one of these but *The Kiss Quotient* by Helen Hoang, often these are books written by women of color, and like there's real pushback by women of color who write romance novels to be like, Nope, I want dark skinned Black women on the cover of my romance novel, don't draw a flippin cartoon. So they have become more socially acceptable to read in public because of these cartoons. But like this pushback, don't make it fucking acceptable to read in public, or this should actually be acceptable to read in public. So it's been really interesting, like the evolution of this public private sphere that you're talking about.

Hannah McGregor 19:20

Yeah. And the trends that we're talking about just are continuing to escalate. Like in 2021, Penguin Random House, romance, sales went up 50%, which is huge. And I got a theory about why it is and I think it has a lot to do, not only with pandemic comfort reading, but with women leaving the workplace in record numbers during the pandemic. And that is all context, I think, that will help us to theorize the rise of romance a little more.

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

I hope everyone is ready to theorize romance for a while in "The theory We Need." So I'm going to be drawing primarily here on the work of American literary and cultural studies scholar, Janice Radway who (brag) I was on a panel with once! **[Marcelle gasps in surprise]** Oh yeah, yeah, that's my claim to fame. I may not have gotten a secret from Julia Quinn, but I did co present with Janice Radway at the MLA.

Vanessa Zoltan 20:27

I love Julia Quinn. But Janice is an icon.

Hannah McGregor 20:31

She's so cool. She was talking about zines. That's her research area. But we're not talking about her zine research. We are talking about her field defining 1984 book, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. Vanessa, are you familiar with Janice Radway's work?

Vanessa Zoltan 20:49

So I'm in the middle of a move. And I have a little box of books that I'm like, these are the books that I need with me until the day of the move. The last load in the car is a purse, dog, and small box of books. And *Reading the Romance* is in my small box of books. I can't do things without it. I can't do my work without it. It's seminal.

Hannah McGregor 21:11

Oh, no, it's not. Gross.

Marcelle Kosman 21:12

It's ovular. [Vanessa laughs]

Vanessa Zoltan 21:17

It's vaginal! [Hannah and Marcelle laugh]

Hannah McGregor 21:21

Say what you will about at the moment, it is definitely vaginal. [Marcelle laughs] And Marcelle, since this is an audio medium, people couldn't see you hold up your copy just now. Tell me about your relationship to Radway's scholarship.

Marcelle Kosman 21:35

I was introduced to Jan Radway by my thesis supervisor at the time, Julie Rack, who was helping me to figure out how to theorize women's science fiction and fantasy writing. Because it turned out at that point in my dissertation work that nobody had written about the specific texts that I wanted to write about. And I was having a really hard time learning how to theorize why these women would be writing in this genre and why it is relevant that women were reading it. Anyway, even though Radway is talking about romance, it was really helpful for me in terms of learning how to like, understand women's reading, as a practice and as a kind of practice that exists outside the very classically theorized political spheres of the importance of literature, you know?

Hannah McGregor 22:37

Yeah, beautifully said. And that was sort of Radway's like field defining intervention. I just read in the 1994 rerelease of *Reading the Romance*, there's an updated introduction. She's reflecting back from the perspective of a decade on writing this book, and recognizing some interesting things like she was doing a thing in the states that was basically in trying to invent cultural studies, while cultural studies was simultaneously being invented as a field in the UK, by the Birmingham school. And that sort of there's like this parallel development happening at a moment when the sort of, you know, big intervention was all of these scholars starting to say, like, maybe our jobs are not just to look at like, great works, quote, unquote, of a culture. And to assume that like, by looking at the great works, that's the way we best understand a culture, like maybe we should actually be looking at the things that people really read.

And so that was like a mind blowing intervention in and of itself, the idea that we should study popular culture. But then, on top of that, Radway was like, well, it's not just enough to take sort of the methods that we've developed to study great works, and use those on popular culture because like, if you try to read a romance novel using the new critical lenses that you would use to talk about modernist poetry, it's not going to thrive under that particular lens. So you also need new methodologies, and one of Radway's big interventions with the idea of ethnographies of reading.

Marcelle Kosman 24:27

Oh, what's an ethnography?

Hannah McGregor 24:29

An ethnography is a genre of writing that emerged out of anthropology as a discipline. And it's essentially a sort of study of the way people do something. So usually sort of really embedded in that cultural context. And it's a way of like, really looking at all of the cultural and social minutiae that surrounds a particular kind of cultural practice. So Radway is doing an ethnography of romance reading in this book. In her big follow up, *A Feeling for Books* she actually does an auto ethnography, which is where you do an ethnography of yourself in order to theorize the Book of the Month Club. And like lo and behold, we've got an expert on ethnographies of reading here because Vanessa, I believe you have, in some ways written sort of an autoethnography of reading.

Vanessa Zoltan 25:25

Wow. I do love what that makes me sound like. It makes me sound like an academic. Oh my God, my mom is so proud right now. It's what she wanted me to be. I wrote what I call a

collection of sermons using *Jane Eyre* as the liturgy instead of the Bible. So yes, and I explore my relationship with *Jane Eyre*. I mean, it's mostly not about my relationship with *Jane Eyre*, it really just is... my book is an attempt to say like, you can treat anything as sacred. You can live your life in conversation with whatever text you want to. And if that is *Sex in the City*, great, just like do it, do it well. Do it with passion. And my text is like this very disturbing romance novel from the 1830s. But yeah, I just think that books are a great place to go for meaning making. And it doesn't have to be the Bible.

Hannah McGregor 26:18

Yeah, yeah. 100%. And the way that we make meaning with books is personal and specific.

Vanessa Zoltan 26:27

Right. And I will say, like, a book that blew my mind. So I was studying at Harvard Divinity School, and trying to figure out my own methodology for treating secular things as sacred. And just for fun, I read *Bad Feminist* by Roxane Gay. And it blew my mind because she was writing highly intellectual and scholarly essays, mixed with memoir personal essays. One that really blew my mind was like using *Hunger Games* as a text, right? And I was like, Oh, my God, you can do all three of those things at once. Right? And so I feel like I'm sure there are other authors that, you know, Roxane Gay is on their shoulders and other authors who are doing it at the same time. But she was the first author who I came across who was like, Look, I live my life in conversation with *Hunger Games*. And let me talk to you about my body and mental health and sexual assault in conversation with the *Hunger Games*. And I was like, okay.

Hannah McGregor 27:26

Yeah, yeah, and I think cultural studies as a discipline, I think, in a lot of ways paved the way for this rise of a particular kind of pop culture criticism writing that brings memoir in, because it legitimized the idea that we are living our lives in conversation with all kinds of popular culture, and that the relationship we have to popular culture is significant and worth talking about.

Vanessa Zoltan 27:56

Right. And there's a huge rise in this kind of book in the 2000s, right? Like *My Life in Middlemarch*, *How Proust Can Save Your Life*, right? Like these are very niche to like kind of typical call kinds of books that are complicated. I have thoughts on them that are not relevant to this conversation.

Hannah McGregor 28:14

Complicated. So in addition to sort of bringing this ethnographic lens in and saying, like, we should talk about what people do with books, another key intervention of *Reading the Romance*

lies in how Radway thinks about communities of interpretation. So Marcelle, I'm going to ask you to read this quote, and this is from that 1994, revised introduction to the book.

Marcelle Kosman 28:40

Quote, "it was the women readers' construction of the act of romance reading as a Declaration of Independence, that surprised me into the realization that the meaning of their media use was multiply determined, and internally contradictory. And to get at its complexity, it would be helpful to distinguish analytically between the significance of the event of reading and the meaning of the text constructed as its consequence. What the book gradually became then, was less an account of the way romances as texts were interpreted, than of the way romance reading as a form of behavior operated as a complex intervention in the ongoing social life of actual social subjects, women who saw themselves first as wives and mothers." End quote.

Hannah McGregor 29:40

Okay, beautifully, beautifully read. Marcelle, can you explain to us what that quote tells us?

Marcelle Kosman 29:44

So what I'm getting from this long quote here is that Radway is saying that when we look at romance reading and we look at people who are reading romance novels, what is interesting is less the texts that they are choosing and more about the practice. So more about what it means to the reading subject to carve out space for themselves in their lives, and how we kind of see this as a pattern across like a demographic of people.

Hannah McGregor 30:16

Yes, 100%. And Radway gets into, like, they do have preferences, you know, her romance readers, they have preferences for particular kinds of stories, and she does a study of what they prefer. But at the heart, the intervention that comes from her conversations with these readers, is that first and foremost, it's the fact of reading as an act of independence, as a sort of clawing back of a chunk of your day to do something that is non-productive and solely for you. And that's the piece that feels radical to them.

Vanessa Zoltan 30:51

And it's just important to me to say that two of the super consumers of romance novels, demographically, are people in nursing homes and people in prison.

Marcelle Kosman 31:02

Interesting.

Vanessa Zoltan 31:03

And that is true across gender, right? And so like this idea of reading toward hope, toward a happy ending, while in these places that we traditionally think of as places of being trapped, like being a housewife in the 70s, when Radway was doing, you know, the bulk of her research in the 70s and 80s. Like, that seems like another kind of trapped to me.

Hannah McGregor 31:26

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah, that's so that's a really powerful parallel of like, you know, who are the subjects who are in positions where they have really minimal agency in terms of how they spend their day to day lives? And how does reading figure as a sort of space of imaginative escape? There tends to be disdain for people who read for escape. And I think that that is a distinction that emerges from people who have a lot of control over what their day to day lives look like.

Marcelle Kosman 31:55

And I think to the other relationship between say housewives and people in nursing homes and people in prisons, I think, for people who don't know what that life entails, it is assumed that they have nothing to do all day anyway, as though it is some kind of like life of leisure, to know that somebody in that space is taking time to read a romance novel. It's like, well, not only do you have all this time that you could do anything with and be productive. Instead, you're choosing to spend your already very leisurely existence, doing something very selfish. So there's like layers of willful misunderstanding and disdain for these practices.

Hannah McGregor 32:43

Yeah, and isn't that just the case of the cultural practices of all marginalized groups? Just layers of willful misunderstanding and disdain.

Vanessa Zoltan 32:51

Yeah. The other thing that I feel like I have to say, in this context is like, I just always have to misquote Ursula K Le Quin, which is, like people talk shit about escapism, but you rarely escaped to bad places, you escape to places of hope, you escape out of prison, you escape to beautiful places. And so we need escape in order to imagine a better world so that we can build that better world, like, these are radical acts to be engaging in and like deeply important ones.

Hannah McGregor 33:26

Okay. Yes. And when we start to actually talk about the content of romance as a genre, we do have to talk about what people are escaping into and what kind of fantasy is being presented as

the one you want to escape to. So I'm going to ask you, Vanessa and you, Marcelle, to read two Radway quotes back to back. And then we're going to discuss the tensions inherent therein.

Vanessa Zoltan 33:57

Quote, "I tried to make a case for seeing romance reading as a form of individual resistance to a situation predicated on the assumption that it is women alone who are responsible for the care and emotional nurturance of others. Romance reading buys time and privacy for women, even as it addresses the corollary consequence of their situation. The physical exhaustion and emotional depletion brought about by the fact that no one within the patriarchal family is charged with their care." End quote.

Marcelle Kosman 34:30

Quote, "Does the romance's endless rediscovery of the virtues of a passive female sexuality merely stitch the reader ever more resolutely into the fabric of patriarchal culture? Or alternatively, does the satisfaction a reader derives from the act of reading itself, an act she chooses, often in explicit defiance of others' opposition lead to a new sense of strength and independence? Romance authors assert that the newly active, more insistent female sexuality displayed in the genre is still most adequately fulfilled in an intimate, monogamous relationship characterized by love and permanence." End quote.

Hannah McGregor 35:21

So, romance, is it patriarchal? Or is it feminist? Discuss.

Vanessa Zoltan 35:29

I get.... Ah... **[Hannah laughs]** Okay. Obviously, the answer is both.

Hannah McGregor 35:37

You know the secret answer is always both.

Vanessa Zoltan 35:40

Sure. Sure. Sure. I know. I'm sorry. So yes, it's incredibly patriarchal. But why is this the place where we are attacking patriarchy where it is giving women pleasure?

Hannah McGregor 35:52

No, Vanessa, we're attacking it everywhere. We're attacking it everywhere. Don't worry about it.

Vanessa Zoltan 35:57

Not we! But society, right? Like, why is society like 'and that is patriarchal.' I'm like, Do you know what else is patriarchal? The gender wage gap, go fix that. And then you can address romance novel patriarchy, like, we are using the tool of our oppression, to enjoy ourselves, leave it to us, and that is the feminist radical act. Thank you for coming to my speech. I will stop.

Marcelle Kosman 36:22

I think that that is like so, so beautifully framed, Vanessa, because you're totally right. Everything we do is in the service of the patriarchy, it is so hard to get out of it. And so why is it that it's only when a marginalized group engages in some kind of pleasure? You know? Like, I think about this all the time, whenever TERF's get really pissed off about how like trans women who really like lean into femininity, it's like, well, you're saying that you can only be a woman if you wear like lipstick and shave. And it's like, Well, okay, sure, but also all of these other women. So you're only getting mad at this one group of people, and it's the most marginalized group of people. So yeah, I think you really, I think you really articulated it.

Hannah McGregor 37:21

The thing I can't like, whenever somebody says like, oh, you know, books like *50 Shades of Grey* are setting feminism back. I'm like, okay, but our reading, our women's reading, women's reading of romance, accelerates with our liberation. Like, it just does. It's like, we read more romance as we become freer. So that does suggest that however it is operating in our lives, it is not sending us back.

Vanessa Zoltan 37:53

The other thing I'll say is just that I really do think reading romance novels for the last seven years has taught me to demand more of men. I'm like, Oh, it is completely fictional. But I think almost every romance novel I've read, I think that there may be three or four exceptions have been written by women. But it feels possible when you're in that imaginative space and it is Mr. Winterbourne. It is actually Mr. Winterbourne. It is not Lisa Kleypas, who is like showing you that a man can take your headache very seriously. And your headache can be a problem for him, for him to help you solve. And then I can act like my headache really matters around my husband. And because I act like it matters, my husband's not a monster. So he acts like my headache matters. Whereas before, I think I would have hidden my headache and been like it's just a headache, because everything else you read about headaches as represented in Victorian times are like women getting the vapors. So to your point, Hannah, I think that they are instrumental in our liberation not only representative of the furthering of feminism.

Hannah McGregor 39:00

I love that. I really love that, imagining the possibilities of being nurtured then brings into your day to day life a different kind of behavior, in terms of your understanding of the ways that you deserve care.

Vanessa Zoltan 39:16

Yeah, and I think it's really true. Like until I read *50 Shades of Grey*, it did not occur to me that one of the reasons I don't like gifts is that I have always experienced gifts specifically from men as a burden, right? I'm like, thank you for this. I can't actually use it, right? Like it's battery operated, and I can't afford those batteries, whatever it is, right? Like even in the most basic levels. And then I was like, I never totally articulated that to myself. And then in *50 Shades of Grey*, she gets a computer and I'm like, What the fuck is she going to do with that? And then the internet setup guy comes and I'm like, imagine a man who sends the internet guy, right and then like, I'm like, oh, it's not that I don't like gifts. I hate thoughtless gifts.

Hannah McGregor 40:04

You don't want somebody to give you logistics.

Vanessa Zoltan 40:07

Right! Or cost me money, I need things to actually be thought out in order for them to be helpful. And romance novels taught me that I can expect and ask for that.

Hannah McGregor 40:18

I love it. Okay. I really want us to get into talking about *Bridgerton*. But before we do that, there's one other thing I want to bring into the conversation, because I do want to talk about the sex of it all. And there are many ways in which *Reading the Romance* stays relevant. But when Radway gets into the specifics of romance novels, it's extremely romance novels from the 1970s. And the genre has changed. So I'm going to bring into conversation a very contemporary article. This was published this year in a special issue of a popular culture journal about *Bridgerton*. This article in particular is by Kyra Hunting, it's called "From private pleasure to erotic spectacle: Adapting *Bridgerton* to female audience desires." And what Hunting does in it is basically a close reading of how the sex was adapted between Julia Quinn's first two *Bridgerton* novels, and the first two seasons of the Netflix series.

And her main argument is that the sex on the Netflix adaptation is way tamer. And that it needs to be, both because in television as a medium more work has to be done to distinguish prestige television from pornography. And that is something that like the *Bridgerton* producers have done a lot of work to maintain, like, really diligently sending takedown notices to keep all the

sex scenes off Pornhub without really caring if they're on YouTube, like it's okay for them to be YouTube, they can't be on PornHub because they can't be porn.

But romance novels have been blurring the lines between romance and erotica for way longer. And a big part of why that blurring can happen and why the sex can get like pretty fucking risque in romance novels, is because of the private way women consume that content, right? You're not like sitting down in the living room with your friends or your partner and watching it. You're like, you're reading that book. It's all up here. So, Marcelle, would you please read this one quote from Kyra Hunting?

Marcelle Kosman 42:36

Quote "For romance novel fans, smut to varying degrees is an accepted and desirable convention in the genre. Many romance novels not only depict but are designed to produce erotic pleasure. As a premium show on Netflix associated with a prominent media brand Shondaland, the *Bridgerton* series draws on its perceived pushing of boundaries regarding sexual depictions for marketing appeal, while also policing boundaries around its aestheticized eroticism, and its appropriate uses." End quote.

Hannah McGregor 43:13

So if there's less room for ambivalence, especially around things like consent, and power dynamics, in television meant for the female gaze than there is in romance novels. And if television viewing is a more public activity than romance reading, then, arguably, some aspects of what women enjoy about reading romance is inevitably lost in an adaptation like *Bridgerton*. [Marcelle and Vanessa gasp with excitement] And that claim leads me to my thesis statement. And that means it's time for our next segment.

[Upbeat interlude music plays]

Marcelle Kosman 43:59

Okay, Hannah, it's the segment "In This Essay, I Will," so it's time for you to make a bold, critical assertion. You're going to make the internet meme come to life. And Vanessa and I are going to pick it apart.

Hannah McGregor 44:15

Can't wait. While the mainstream success of the Netflix series *Bridgerton* signals a watershed moment in the mainstream acceptance of romance novels as a legitimate form of cultural production, the adaptation of romance to the small screen disrupts many of the distinct pleasures of romance reading, pleasures that might more accurately account for the surge in

romance reading during the pandemic. What both the novels and their adaptation have in common, however, is the construction of the past as a fantastic space. That despite its heightened gender restrictions, offers viewers a fantasy of escape from the hazards of modernity. In this essay, I will...

Marcelle Kosman 45:10

Oh, Hannah, it's so good. It's perfect. You just, you really got it, you got it, you don't even need to finish. It's so perfect. **[Hannah laughs]**

Vanessa Zoltan 45:21

I think that this is really right, I wrote an article for *Slate* about the adaptation of season two of *Bridgerton*. And that I think that season two of *Bridgerton* made a mistake. There's a huge difference in the book and the season. So in the book, *The Viscount that Loved Me*, Kate and Anthony get engaged very early, it's very different. And they get engaged because Anthony has this trauma because his father died of a bee sting in front of him, and a bee lands on Kate's breast, and the bee stings Kate on her breast, and he goes into trauma response, and so sucks the bee sting out of Kate's breast. And this is like 1/3 of the way through the book, and they get caught in that compromising situation. And so he's like, great, we gotta get married. I'm a gentleman, this is what we do, we get married.

And then as many people know, in the series, it's totally different, right? Like they have that bee moment. But actually, they don't get together until the very end of the series. This is not a, you know, trapped together situation. And I think that the reason that Shondaland did that is because books one and two of *Bridgerton*, and season one, and therefore seasons one and two of *Bridgerton* would be very similar, right? There's this trapped together caught element. But one of the virtues of romance is that you actually get to explore the differences of nuance, because of the similarities of tropes.

And you can actually get this like, really interesting comparison of Anthony, the hero in season two of *Bridgerton*. And Simon, right, like, these are two men who are traumatized by their fathers, one because he hated his father, and the other because he loved his father and lost him. And like, that is very interesting, right, but you lose the nuance of that comparison by trying to make seasons one and two so different by not giving into the genre of it. And I yeah, I think again, like this is about adaptation, right? People would be saying, people who don't know romance, well, would be like, Oh, my God, this is just like last season. Right? Whereas romance readers are like, yeah, so that's the point. Like, that's the brilliance. And so yeah, I think that your point about sex scenes, right, we can see that same point, enacted in different places in this adaptation process.

Hannah McGregor 47:51

Yeah, absolutely a sense that some of the characteristics of romance as a genre that create the characteristic pleasures of reading romance, get lost in the adaptation, in part because of different norms around representing sex. But you're right, also, because of different norms of how narrative is expected to work. And like, the role of novelty versus familiarity. And, you know, they're making it prestige television, other genres of television don't have expectations of novelty in the same way, and absolutely thrive in the space of like, tiny variations on a theme, but like, in the model of prestige TV, it's like, things need to keep growing, escalating, changing.

Vanessa Zoltan 48:39

Right. And so, because of the genre, we have this new type of TV, but the TV adaptations betray what's so beautiful about the genre, to some extent.

Marcelle Kosman 48:53

I have a question. I'm wondering if the unintended benefit of that is that viewers who enjoyed the series and decide that they want to read the books, are then able to retain some of that reading for the first time pleasure that often gets lost when you know the ending? Because the story takes on different twists and turns, mayhaps?

Vanessa Zoltan 49:18

I think yes. And I think that there are other benefits, too, right? Like, the novels don't have any diversity. And I don't think that *Bridgerton* has handled diversity in its shows, brilliantly. I think that is flawed, but I love that it's trying to and like, why should beautiful actors not be able to be in Regency dramas just because they were, you know, because it's a continuation of forms of oppression that existed in the 19 century, right, that we can't cast Black actors in these roles. And so I'm excited for that. And so yeah, some of these deviations are just for the good, you know, I absolutely think. And yeah, one of them being I hope that people then go back and read the books and are like, wait, what happened? He's sucking on her boob in front of people!

Marcelle Kosman 50:07

Wow! This is way hotter than the TV show. Oh, my goodness.

Hannah McGregor 50:11

It's gonna be. Vanessa, on your point of the racial diversity in the series. That is a thing I'm really interested in, like the conversations around when we think about sort of the role of fantasy and escape in historical romance in particular, because, you know, we talked a little bit when talking about Radway, about sort of the way that romance readers are escaping into a fantastical world,

but it's one that is often more, at least on the surface seems to be more restrictive in terms of gender norms.

But anybody who reads historical romance knows that the history these characters are being dropped into has very little to do with actual history. Like it's really not about the actual past. It's about the past as a fantastical construction of a place. Like it's another genre of fantasy, right? Like, Regency is a fantasy construct, like Middle Earth is.

Vanessa Zoltan 51:18

Absolutely.

Hannah McGregor 51:19

And the main way I read the racial diversity of *Bridgerton* was not as a sort of historically accurate corrective, because like, there were people of color in England during the Regency era, we just know that. But as an extension of who that fantasy is allowed to be for. Because if it is a fantastical space, where we can escape, then, like everybody can escape there, right?

Vanessa Zoltan 51:46

Oh, totally. My critique of it is just that I think season one in particular of *Bridgerton* did kind of a half assed job of it. I want either that argument, right, where it's like, either actual representations based on accuracy, because there were people of color in England at the time, or we're just doing race blind casting, like, let's just go with it. Or there is a reason why there are people of color in the ton and like in that society, and we're going to tell you that story. And instead, what season one of *Bridgerton* did was pretend it was race blind casting for like, the first four episodes. And then there was like, one conversation that's like, we get to be here as Black people because of this one thing. And you're like, Okay, that's not enough information. You know, and I think that they've done some corrections.

Some of the correction that they did have was in the show *Queen Charlotte*, which I think does a huge disservice to mental health, where King George has, like, some mysterious anxiety induced bipolar disorder that doesn't exist in reality. So I agree with you, Hannah. But just like with fantasy, right, like Dragon Middle Earth fantasy, I think that there are more and less responsible ways to be creative within the fantasy space. And I also love that there are some more accurate romance novels, right? *Bringing Down the Duke* really does a great job of doing a historically accurate, you know, view of bluestockings at Oxford at a certain time and the abject poverty they would live in, right? Different novels handle this differently. But I do think that there have been moments where the *Bridgerton* series has handled these beautiful opportunities for fantasy, poorly.

Hannah McGregor 53:35

100%. And that, you know, one of the big arguments in Hunting's article that I referenced in the last segment is that the combination of attempting to adapt the complexities of romance novel sex, which very frequently plays with consent and aggression, but it's really common, it's kind of in the DNA of modern romance novels. And bringing that onto the screen, even in a sort of toned down fashion, while also introducing racial diversity created a dynamic in the relationship between Simon and Daphne that was, as many people have discussed, really distressing, because Daphne does-

Vanessa Zoltan 54:24

It's a white woman assaulting a Black man.

Hannah McGregor 54:26

It's a white woman assaulting a Black man and forcing him to impregnate her, which has really harrowing historical resonances that were not responsibly handled in that first season at all.

Vanessa Zoltan 54:38

And again, I think that you're speaking to this, like co-watching, and just the way that we assume more people watch TV than read any single book, in reading a piece of genre fiction when you are reading it yourself, you know, intuitively, that representation does not mean condoning.

Hannah McGregor 54:57

Oh, yeah, that something being shown to you is not the book saying it's okay.

Vanessa Zoltan 55:03

Yeah, right. Like you read that and you're like, it's representing us. That doesn't mean that the author thinks it's good, right? And you're like, so yes, it's really creepy that Daphne does that. But whatever. It's also hot and like, I got turned on by it. And this is a safe space where I can get turned on by x, y, and z things. But as soon as it becomes a TV show, right, and you're sitting there and watching it with someone else, you're like, I don't think that's okay. Right? Like it actually is representing you because it's become a social experience. And so yeah, it's harder to remember that representation isn't condoning behavior on a TV show that has, you know, three times the size of Canada watching it.

Marcelle Kosman 55:42

Is part of the issue, perhaps that we as a culture, are not very good at taking the experiences of male survivors of sexual assault seriously?

Hannah McGregor 55:55

Yeah. Yeah, for sure. It's part of like, the reason why that was able to make it into the series at all, despite the fact that sexual violence in romance novels has become really unpopular since the 70s and 80s when it really had it's hay day, is that one of many functions of patriarchy is that we don't think of men as potential victims of sexual violence. Because men are always positioned-

Vanessa Zoltan 56:23

Of women-

Hannah McGregor 56:24

Of women or of men.

Vanessa Zoltan 56:26

Yeah, totally, totally-

Hannah McGregor 56:27

Just men are the aggressors, as depicted in patriarchy. And if a man is subjected to sexual violence, it's emasculating. Which you know, ties into sort of homophobic depictions of male sexual violence. But like we've got rom coms where we see men being assaulted, and it's just played as a joke in an era when that would not be done with female characters, for sure.

Vanessa Zoltan 56:52

It also shows, about our society, that we think that if you can physically and literally get out of the situation, then it's a little bit your fault that you were raped. Right? Because I think that part of the argument is that Simon is bigger than Daphne. So did she really rape him? He could have thrown her off of him, right? Like he could have literally removed her from him. And so there's also just this belief that rape is like an AB proposition, and that unless you are being bound and gagged, it's not really rape.

Hannah McGregor 57:27

Yeah. And in the book, it plays on ongoing sexual power dynamics between them, including the fact that he does physically overpower her in earlier scenes. Again, in a way like I am, I truly, guys, I have read 71 romance novels this year, so far. I am a voracious romance reader. And I like watching Game of Thrones on screen, for example, it made me physically ill. Watching on screen

depictions of things that happen in books I read makes me feel a lot worse, because they're just not the same medium, and they just don't function the same way.

And part of that difference is undeniably the function of both private consumption and what goes hand in hand with the sort of private internal nature of reading, which is the function of our imaginations. That's what makes it possible for me as a reader to picture things in the way that I need to or want to, or will most enjoy. And it also is what makes the act of reading itself feel liberatory in the moment you're doing it, because you are escaping into your own imagination. And when you are, you know, being crushed on all sides by the soul-deadening banality of living under late capitalism, escaping into your own imagination slaps.

Marcelle Kosman 59:08

I know we're wrapping up this segment, but I would like to just return to the pleasures of watching *Bridgerton*. In addition to the pleasures of reading romance novels, one of the, I think, Hannah, to speak to that point of the soul crushing banality of late capitalism. The *Bridgerton* sets are so luxurious and so rich in Technicolor, right, like they're so over the top saturated in colors. And I think it does a very good job of illustrating the feelings that you are encouraged to have, via color when you're watching this as a fantasy. As a kind of fantasy genre.

Vanessa Zoltan 59:58

It's a fantasy on every level, right? It's a high functioning family with eight children, all of whom love each other and tease each other, the perfect amount, and like sneak cigarettes together and like, who doesn't want to be a part of that family? It's also the benevolent rich person, right? These are super rich people who are good. I mean, like, who doesn't want that fantasy? It's a London mansion with Wisteria, right? Who doesn't want that fantasy? And then it's like Taylor Swift covers in violin, right? Like, it is just designed to be this fantasy space. And I'm just, I gotta say, like, when I watched that first episode, I was like, Thank you, I have been waiting my whole life to be catered to. And I have taken every scrap you've thrown at me. And been like, sure Sex in the City of the movie, like, Thanks for trying. And then some scraps like Mamma Mia. I'm like, You did it. You did it. You gave me what I wanted. And *Bridgerton*, it's not perfect. It did not give me everything I want in the world. But I was just like, Thank you for trying. You're trying so hard to cater to me. I am in your head. And I just love it. Like, keep trying. You're doing great.

Hannah McGregor 1:01:13

Yeah, I love that though. I love that idea of the sort of the visual and aesthetic design being an attempt to externalize the experience of imaginative escape. Like, what is the visual vocabulary of imaginative escape into another time and space and how, you know, the series sacrifices historical accuracy over and over and over again. I mean, sacrifices? Doesn't even care about it.

Because the purpose it is putting history to is a sort of fantastical one that is totally about the emotions that it's going to evoke for the viewer.

Vanessa Zoltan 1:01:59

I can't wait for the like Architectural Digest article to come out that is like *Bridgerton* changed landscape architecture, right? Like, there's a shortage of Wisteria and lavender. Everybody wants it in their garden. Like this gonna be real, right? Like, whose eyes see that and don't feast on it and be like me want more?

Hannah McGregor 1:02:25

Yeah, I mean, gun to my head, I couldn't tell you what Wisteria looks like but I take your point.

Vanessa Zoltan 1:02:32

It looks like the cover of *Bridgerton*. **[Hannah laughs]** Wait for it.

Hannah McGregor 1:02:35

It looks like a fantastic escape from the patriarchy.

Marcelle Kosman 1:02:37

Flowers.

Vanessa Zoltan 1:02:39

Imagine a cascading waterfall of lavender, that is what Wisteria looks like.

Hannah McGregor 1:02:45

Hot.

[Material Girls Theme plays briefly]

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Marcelle Kosman 1:03:26

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Special thanks to everyone on the Witch, Please Productions team, including our digital content coordinator Gaby Iori, **[Sound effect of BOING]** our social media manager and marketing designer Zoe Mix, **[Sound effect of record reversing]** our sound engineer Erik Magnus, **[Sound effect of chimes]** and our executive producer Hannah Rehak, aka COACH! **[Sound effect of sports whistle blowing]**

Hannah McGregor 1:04:16

At the end of every episode we will thank everyone who has joined our Patreon OR boosted their tier to help make our work possible. Our enormous gratitude this episode goes out to:

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Megan G

Lydia O

We'll be back next episode to tackle another piece of pop culture through a whole new theoretical lens, but until then:

Marcelle Kosman 1:05:07

If that sounds like an awfully long list to you, it's probably because these folks are jumping on board to help us support *Gender Playground*, which is our new podcast about gender affirming care for Kids.

Hannah McGregor 1:05:21

You can check out the pilot episode if you haven't already in the *Witch, Please* feed or see the pilot episode and a bunch of related resources on ohwitchplease.ca. It's a really good podcast and I really love it and every episode gives me full body goosebumps so I really think you should listen.

Marcelle Kosman 1:05:44

Thanks, Hannah. That's so nice! We'll be back next episode to tackle another piece of pop culture through a whole new theoretical lens. But until then...

Vanessa Zoltan 1:05:54

Later, gators!

[*Material Girls* Theme plays: "Shopping Mall" by Jay Arner and Jessica Delisle]