

Love Right Podcast

Speakers: Venessa and Joi-Marie

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Venessa Today on the show, we have Joi-Marie McKenzie, an entertainment and lifestyle writer for ABC News, the creator of the online website *The Fab Empire* and author of *The Engagement Game*. Welcome Joi-Marie to the *Love Right Unplugged Podcast*.

Joi-Marie Thank you so much; I'm so excited to talk about love and relationships with you.

Venessa I'm so excited, as well. We are talking about your new book, *The Engagement Game*. I love the book. I love the title. It was absolutely hilarious and real at the same time.

Joi-Marie Awesome. Thank you for that.

Venessa You're welcome. You know what? Why don't you just tell us a little bit about *The Engagement Game*?

Joi-Marie Sure. So, *The Engagement Game* is my real story. It's a memoir about my five-year relationship. I was with this guy who I loved dearly, and I'm thinking, "Okay, it's been five years, where's my ring?" You know, that's what women expect if they want to get married, and I do. And so, I went to my older sister and asked, "What do I do to get this guy to propose to me?" And she said, "Oh, that's easy, you just do these five things". The book is literally me doing these five things, sometimes failing at it – hilariously and then, eventually, I have to make a decision. Am I going to continue with this and get the happily ever after by playing games or am I going to have the courage to find a happily ever after in a way that I did not expect? I don't want to spoil it, but if you read the subtitle, you figure out what I decided to choose. But, that's the jist.

Venessa Alright. Excellent. The thing that I really appreciated about this book is that it reads like a novel. Yet, you say it's a memoir. As an avid reader and also a writer, I really appreciate that. So, one of the things that I wondered about it is, yes, this is your memoir but how much of it is really fact, and how much of it is really fiction?

Joi-Marie Honestly, most of it is really true. I think ... I know that they say that sometimes truth is stranger than fiction. But, most of it is true. Obviously, the engagement game part wasn't just one conversation with my older sister giving me advice about what to do and how to act and how to be in order to become a better or a more attractive wife for my boyfriend. Those conversations happened multiple times over many months. Maybe over three months. So, I did take some creative license there just so I wouldn't bore you guys, but most all of it's true.

Venessa Cool. Interestingly enough, I thought to myself, "I wonder what other people are thinking when they read this book". What's Adam going to think, and what's Char going to think when they ...

Joi-Marie Yeah, that's a great question, and I'm a big believer in being fair. I've been mentioned in books before and didn't get a heads up at all, and just finding out by having someone say, "Oh, I think you're in this book". I actually sent the book to, not all, not going to lie, but most of the men in the book that I still keep in contact with. I sent it to them about six months ago because I wanted them to come to terms with what I was writing about because obviously, I am sure that they are not going to see it eye-to-eye like my experience but I wanted to be fair. I wanted to give them that opportunity because, who knows, they could write a book about me, and I hope that they would give me the opportunity to read it first before the world reads it. So, Adam has read it. Shawn ...

Venessa That's his real name??

Joi-Marie No, of course not, no, no, no. I actually chose – I would never say publicly what his real name is, but I kind of chose Adam as the name because that's the first Man, the biblical name in the Bible of the first Man, so it was kind of a symbolic choice. But, yes, most of them have read it, and all of them have said, "I'm just really proud of you". Thank God because I would have been like, "What you gonna say?" But everyone has been very, very sweet about the whole thing.

Venessa That's fantastic. I'm glad to hear that. That's excellent.

Joi-Marie They're good guys.

Venessa Well, they sound like they're really good guys. Everyone in the book just sounded incredible, and it was one of those things where you just think, "Why can't these incredible guys and this incredible girl get together?"

Joi-Marie Yes. It's almost like you don't know who to root for at certain times but I think that's what a relationship is. I couldn't just put all the blame on those guys. Although I really, really wanted to. But I couldn't.

Venessa I completely get that. And, I think that, as women, one of the things that we realize is that we want to place the blame on men, and a lot of it is because we're in a place where we're ready, not realizing if they're ready. I can think about when I was 29, I was probably literally in the same place as you. I was thinking, "Okay, I'm finished with undergrad, out of graduate school, I've got my career and okay, now I'm going to get married".

Joi-Marie Right. And it just does not happen like that. Usually.

Venessa It usually doesn't happen like that. I mean, funny thing is that when we think about all of these checks, these external pressures and the internal pressures that we put on ourselves. Do you feel like, in the place that you are now, that you can have these conversations with other women, your girls, and other people that may be stuck in this mindset. Don't focus on the ring, focus on the relationship. Don't focus on the wedding, focus on the marriage. What do you say to your friends and to women who may be in the same place right now?

Joi-Marie Yes. Absolutely. I think that's why I wrote this book. Because, when I first started writing this book, I had no idea that I was writing a book, actually. I journaled since I was eight years old, and so I was sitting at home on a Friday night, *Say Yes to the Dress*, and I got up from the couch, frustrated and started writing and that became this book. And I pressed forward because I want women to have these conversations out in the open.

I think that so much of what society tells us is that we should be ashamed to just say, aloud, "I desire marriage", which I think is crazy because, you want what you want and marriage is not something to be ashamed of, but oftentimes the narrative is that "Oh, you're desperate" or "Something must be wrong with you" if you haven't gotten it yet or if you haven't figured it out by yourself.

In my job at ABC news, I talk to a lot of women who have just gotten engaged because I cover a lot of our lifestyle content and, I always ask them, selfishly, "Who did you go to for advice on getting proposed to or about getting engaged?" and they say, "No one" or they say, "Oh, my friends", and you know, rarely do I ever hear, "I went to my Mom or I went to my grandmother" who actually has this wisdom that they've banked. I think that it's strange and sort of interesting that we're going to our peer or resorting to games or figuring this out by ourselves when we can, as a community, come together and say, "Ok, how do we best prepare ourselves to be a wife" if we desire that?

Because I realize that everyone doesn't want to be married, and that's okay. But for me, I desire marriage and so, I think that we should be more open in not letting shame keep us in isolation with our desires and then, the second thing that writing this book made me more confident in is having those conversations with my partner. I'm in a very loving relationship right now, and I just don't have that fear anymore. "What is he going to think if I bring up marriage?" "What is he going to think if I tell him that I'm ready to have children?" "What is he going to think ..." And I'm no longer scared to have those conversations, and I'm also not afraid of being judged for my desires, and I felt that for a long time.

Venessa Absolutely, and I think that what you said is completely key, you have to be comfortable with yourself and comfortable in having those conversations and also having people that you surround yourself with, the wise counsel, the people that you can go to – mothers, grandmothers, aunties, godmothers, that you can have these conversations with about how do I prepare myself for marriage?

Joi-Marie I always say, too, because you can go to everybody for advice, but you go to the people who are happy or who look happy because a lot of time we'll go to our friends, but they're going through it, and so they're looking at relationships through a very disgruntled lens or frustrated lens, and you don't want to go to that person, you want to go to the person who seems like they have it all together. Who can give you positive or more optimistic advice. Yeah, I think that's key.

Venessa Absolutely. I think that's key, as well. One of the things that we talk about in The Love Right, in the podcast, in particular, even though we talk about relationships with authors, matchmakers, etc., but once a month we actually talk to a couple that has been successful in marriage. So, whether they've been married five years or ten years or 50 years, what did it take for you to get to

this place? So, I think that one of the key things that we hear over and over again is respect and communication.

Joi-Marie Absolutely. And, I think that is so – I love that you do that because I think that marriage, especially married couples, there's this sort of Doctrine of Privacy. Married couples, it's like their business, and they keep it to themselves but oftentimes, if they do share with singles or other married couples what works or what doesn't work, instead of hiding behind this veil of privacy, I think that we all benefit, as a collective.

Venessa I think that you're completely right about that. You know, I want to go back to a couple of things in the book, and I'm not going to spoil it for folks. But, one of the things that I think is really important is the whole self-discovery process. And, when I think about the book and in going through the book, it felt like your journey to self-discovery, and one of the things that I thought was really key, was that initially you felt like it may be marriage will potentially complete me. And, I think that a lot of people feel that way and so, I think, what do you say to someone who is in that place where they're feeling like all I need now is a husband.

Joi-Marie It was almost like I had a checklist, and I was thinking, "Okay, everything else is checked off, I need to check off husband". I think that a lot of things play into that. What society tells us that we want. I also want to have children, and I imagine that in a two parent household, so there's pressure on that front, the biology front. But I would tell women don't think of marriage as an accomplishment or a destination or something that you should think that if you don't get it then everything else in your life, that you've accomplished, doesn't matter. Because that's how I felt. I felt like I have a great life, but because I'm not married, something is wrong with me. I believed that. And, sadly enough, I had a partner who said, "Well, yeah, if you want to be a wife, you've got to do this and this and you ain't doin' it, so obviously something is wrong with you", instead of a partner who I have now who says,

“Yeah, you’re not perfect, but I love you anyway”. A sort of unconditional type of partnership.

I think that we put ourselves at a disadvantage when we measure up marriage as the end all, be all for our life. It’s just not. The reality is that the statistic shows that there are more people who are single than are married, and so what does it say to single women, particularly black single women, that something is wrong with you if you are not married when the reality is that most of us aren’t? What does that say to us?

I had to take myself out of that, and get rid of that. It felt almost like a cloak, and I felt so ashamed, and I think that a lot of this book plays with the idea of shame and how it can make us shape-shift, how it can make us hide certain things about ourselves, how it can make us do crazy things, and lie to ourselves, and also lie to our partners.

And so, what I would tell women is to figure out what it is that they truly want. If they desire marriage then be bold in that. If they don’t have it yet, don’t be ashamed that you don’t. Most people don’t, that’s the reality, especially in America. I think it’s 51 or 56 percent are single, so realize that you are in the majority and find happiness in that.

I often say find happiness in your wait. Don’t think that just because you’re not getting it right now means that you’re never going to get it. And also, don’t let your wait stop you. I figured that because I don’t have it now, there’s nothing that I can do to fix this, but in reality, there are so many things that you can do to improve yourself and improve your outlook to help you prepare for what it is that you want.

So, if you desire to be a wife, what are you doing right now to help get yourself prepared? Are you working on yourself? Are you working on being a kinder person? A more caring person? A person who compromises? A person who doesn’t get upset when somebody wakes them up in the middle of the night? Are you

practically preparing to have a person in your space all the time? Are you good with sharing? Are you good with thinking ahead about what your partner desires?

These are all of the practical, day-to-day things, and let me not forget this, deepening your spiritual connection, whatever that is. I am obviously a Christian. My momma raised me; my momma is a bishop of the AME church, and so I am PK times 1000. But, I understand that everybody might not be, so whatever your spiritual connection is, you have to deepen it in order to be in a long-term relationship because love is selfless, and you have to put your ego down, put your wants and desires down in order to be of service in love and in caring and understanding of someone else. So, that's what I would tell somebody.

Venessa Absolutely. Oh My God, everything that you said, I co-sign everything that you said. Amen. And when I talk to people and in the work that I do, that is one of the things that I really talk to people about. The first thing I say is that you can't know love until you know a love that's greater than you. So, if you know a love that's greater than you, then you can actually get to a point where you are able to not only show yourself love, so the whole idea of self-love and growing there, but also, giving that love to someone else. I'm often surprised at how many people, they want to be in a relationship, and they don't love themselves, and they don't love The Lord. I mean, I'm Christian and I'm AME and I know, I'm familiar with Bishop McKenzie and your family very much so.

Joi-Marie Yay, AME! AME Strong! We out here!

Venessa It's just really key, and people just don't have anything to hold on to, and one of the things that I say to people is that you can't even get into a marriage without something to hold onto because if you don't have some type of Higher Power, whether it's God or it's Allah or whomever it may be, you're not going to survive.

Joi-Marie Yeah, whomever. However you identify that Spirit. Because I don't want to make it a Christian thing, but I often speak of The Universe because I think that that connects with more people, people are less offended, but, whatever, it's God.

But I think of being in a marriage like this – Life happens, life is super not easy, and I'm realizing that in my thirties. But it's like being on a plane, and it's going down and the air masks come down, and what does the captain tell you? Put your mask on first before you help somebody else, and that's how I think of being in love or being in a long-term relationship. You have to take care of yourself before you can take care of somebody else.

Because loving someone is super hard, and I think that what my relationship with God teaches me is that there is a possibility for unconditional love. That it doesn't matter, despite if I messed up or if I cursed or if I act up or if I do something that displeases you, that I still have the love of God, so that opens my mind to the possibility that yes, my partner may do something that I dislike, that really grinds my gears, but I know that I am capable of unconditional love because there is someone, a being, a Spirit out there that is loving me in that way, so, that's how I think of it.

Venessa Let's talk about this for a quick second. The whole idea of the equally yoked.

Joi-Marie Yes.

Venessa We're going deep here. We're going deep. One of the things that I thought was interesting about the book, you didn't touch too much on this, but, where Adam was in terms of his spirituality. So, one of the things that you talked about was that you were very active in your faith, and he respected that but he was necessarily in the same place.

Joi-Marie Right. A part of *The Engagement Game* is that I am doing these activities that help me clarify what it is that I want and also make me “more appealing” to be a wife, and so the first step that I ever did was make a list of what I wanted in a husband. It was not to measure up Adam to this list, but it was truly what it was to clarify what it is that I want. Because I had never even asked, which is so crazy to me, but I had never even asked myself what I desire in a husband, and I needed to clarify what I saw as my ideal partner.

Once I wrote my list down, I noticed that Adam, he was a great guy and I loved him, I did, but he, there were some things that he just didn't have, and the most important thing, for me, that he didn't have was a relationship with God. I didn't judge him for it, I loved him in spite of that, but when I'm planning a family, when I am looking for my covenant spouse, I desire a person who has his own relationship with God, and when I clarified that he wasn't really matching up, he wasn't truly equally yoked in that sense, well, it was easier for me to say, “You know what? Although we've spent so much time and dedication into this relationship, we may just need to part ways”.

And so, I think that oftentimes, I hear this all the time, even from my friends asking, “Why are you not marrying him? You've been together for years”. I caution women again about saying things like that to their friends because it doesn't matter how long you've been in a relationship, it just may not be for forever and that's okay. But it doesn't matter if you figure it out on date one or date one thousand and thirteen, you need to eventually clarify if this person is truly what you what you want, then say, “God Bless You, this has been fun, I've learned a lot from you, have a good life”.

Venessa Right. Absolutely.

Joi-Marie And that's okay,, because there are millions of other people on this Earth that you can be in a relationship with and you may be happier.

Venessa Right. Absolutely. You said something that I thought is funny but I tell people this all the time, and I fully believe in this. Let's talk about the list. The list that you should be making. I am a firm believer in having a list of your can't-stands and your must-haves. And so, when we talk about The List, for a lot of people The List is very superficial – he's six feet tall, he's got to make six figures, he's got to drive this car. What are some of the substantive things? You hit on one, which is that person having their own relationship with their Higher Power. What other things should people have on The List?

Joi-Marie Like I said before, this is just not to measure up every man that you meet. That's not the point. It's sort of a set it and forget it thing, where you have written it down, and then you put it away.

For me, my sister told me to put it on my dresser, and so I did that but I didn't look at it. Sometimes I looked at it, and sometimes I didn't but it wasn't a matter of, "Okay, I met a guy. Is he tall, dark and handsome? Does he love Jesus?" It wasn't like that, but it was just for me. But, my list is in the book so everybody has my list now.

The first thing on my list is tall, dark and handsome because, let's just keep it real, I need to look at you, and desire you. So, yes, you can have a little bit of superficiality on there but judge me or whatever, but that's the first thing on my list. But the second thing is have a relationship with God and what followed was respects himself, respects me, respects my family, respects my legacy, is respectable, which means that he moves in the world having respect for all creatures and every being, he's the type that holds the door open for all of the ladies. I forget what else was on there, have integrity, I think. But it was sort of general qualities that I felt would make a man deal with me because I know that I have my own issues and quirks about me.

I'm a writer so all of the stereotypes are true, but they were super general, and they were more qualities, they weren't things like, I wouldn't even think to put something like he has to make six

figures because he may make that today, and then he may get fired and be unemployed for five years, so I didn't put any of that stuff on there about cars or jobs or whatever. But yeah, and now it's so funny because now I think that I should have added more but I think you do what works best for you at that time.

Venessa Absolutely. I think that's key. The funny thing is that I am thinking about a question that I got last week. I do these weekly, is it real, is it right question and answers on Facebook Live and on Instagram, and I got a question about red flags. Red flags in relationships and I said that there are three things that we're talking about red flags on a first date. The three things that I said were that the person talks too much, they don't give you the opportunity to talk at all.

Joi-Marie Oh, I see, okay.

Venessa If they don't give you the opportunity or allow you to ask questions, and they don't ask questions of you, and then the third thing was that if they turned everything around and made it about them, so they were very self-centered and narcissistic. And so, the vast majority of the people I talk to on a regular basis and the Love Right Tribe are mostly women and the question came from a man, and he said, "What are the red flags that men should look for?"

Joi-Marie That's a great question ...

Venessa If you were talking to the men out here, and we have men and women that listen to our podcast, what are some of the things that they should be looking for in a relationship as far as red flags as it relates to their list?

Joi-Marie Sure. I think that the biggest red flag, and I think that this applies for men and women, if they are in heterosexual relationships, but I

think for me the biggest red flag that I always caution my girlfriends and even myself when I was dating, was if they're distracted. Because if they're always on their phone or if they're always looking like they're somewhere else or looking like they don't even want to be there, but the device thing gets me. Because if you can't put your device down for two hours and look me in the eyes and have an uninterrupted conversation for two hours then what are we doing here?

You need to be focused, you need to be intentional about coming here and creating a new connection with me. I hate people who are distracted, and I think that that is a huge red flag. Do you really want to be here? Who are you checking on? And, listen, if they have children, fine. Or if they say, "You know what, my kid is sick today, I'm on this date ..." fine. There are exceptions to every rule but I think that being distracted in general is awful.

I'm trying to think of anything else. Okay, when you're getting to know a person, and I find this now that I've gotten past my 30s. I was dating a guy who was 37, and I was 30 at the time, and I loved our first date because we put everything out on the table. It was like, "You got kids? STDs? Have you been engaged? Been married? Do you have good credit?" He ran down the list but it was kind of nice because I knew exactly where he stood, and he knew exactly where I stood as far as the boxes.

But, if you have a person where you feel like they're being dishonest on the first date, a lot of people just brush this off because oh, they were nervous or oh, they just met me, but if you can lie to me about little things or you can lie to me about yourself – the reality of yourself, then I probably won't give you a second or third date. You need to be upfront and honest from the very beginning, and I think that a lot of us would say well, he was nervous, or well, he just got out of a relationship or no – he's a liar. If he's going to lie to you on the first date, imagine what he's going to do on the 20th date. He's going to continue lying because he can get away with that.

Venessa Exactly.

Joi-Marie Yeah. Those would be my two biggest things. I hate liars, and I hate people that can't give me their attention.

Venessa Perfect. I'll take that. So, you're in New York City now, and it sounds like you are healed from this previous situation and now in a new situation, so New York City – a lot of people think that New York City is a difficult place to date. And to meet and to connect with people, and it sounds like you have been fairly successful in that, so what would you tell us in this area?

Joi-Marie That was not my experience. I loved dating in New York. I loved it. But, you know, I do have friends who say, "Oh my God, it's so hard", and I say, "Well, are you TRYING?", and they say, "No, I'm in the house". Okay, well, you're not going to find him in the house.

When I was dating, I was very intentional. I was still in my healing process, and I knew that I was not ready for anything long-term or anything serious but I want to date but I wanted to date, I wanted to get my feet wet, get out there, and see what had changed because I really hadn't dated anyone for five years, and everything had changed.

Before when I'd dated, Twitter did not exist. Dating online was not a thing, so I wanted to put myself out there, and see what was what. I started by signing up for a couple of dating apps; coffee meets bagel was one that I thought was interesting. It's where they match you with one person a day, and at noon they send you your match. It was interesting but I don't know if I would do it again if I was single again, and then plenty of fish which really sucked. It was just too many fish. But, I think that online dating. It's like you're putting yourself out there but you're really not. So, it's a safe bet.

I would suggest online dating if you haven't already and then, I was very intentional, so when I left the house, I always had a little gloss on. You know, I didn't have my complete face, but I had some mascara on and a little gloss on because you just never know. You know, he may be at the grocery store, he may be at the bar, he may be at the coffee shop. I tried to live my life outside of my apartment. Especially in New York City it's so easy to just be inside because it's so cold sometimes but instead of working at home, I would work at the coffee shop or if someone said, "Hey, you want to grab a drink?" I would say, "Yes, I'll grab a drink, let's go".

I just made sure that I was out and available all the time. I actually found all of the people that I dated, I found them all offline. I didn't even need the dating apps. I found them at Corner Social which is a restaurant in Harlem, I met a guy there. I met a guy at a party, a day party in Brooklyn. I met a guy at church, which sounds terrible. He was cute. And I still go to that church. So, you just have to live your life out loud ,and just be open to whatever comes your way.

Venessa Yeah. I think what you said is really key. I'm a firm believer in that, the person is not going to come knocking on your door. It's not going to be the postman, it's not going to be the FedEx man. If you really want to meet somebody, you need to go outside, and you need to just show up, and show up as your best self. That doesn't mean having your hair looking crazy and yoga pants all the time.

Joi-Marie You've got to look cute. And you may say, "Why have I got to look cute?" Well, because when you look at a man, you want him to look presentable and attractive, so you've got to put out what you desire.

Venessa That's exactly it, that's really key. Well, this has been fantastic. Is there any parting advice that you would give women out here (and men) about love, relationships, dating, what would you tell them?

Joi-Marie This is my main message of the book, and what I really want people – and there are so many sub-messages, but the main one for me is that having the courage to be the authority on yourself.

What that means is that, for a long time, for most of my dating life I always saw myself through the lens of men. And what that means for me is that I would value myself and deem myself worthy based on whether they deemed me worthy. If they deemed me marriage material. If they deemed me girlfriend material, and there is so much danger in putting your worth and your value in somebody else's hands. I will never do that again.

If I had any advice for men and women, it would be to have the courage to be the authority on yourself. Don't let anyone tell you anything about yourself. You are worthy, you are good, you are complete all by yourself. And if you can master that, and the people coming in and out of your life, you can master the ups and downs of life, because you know in your heart and the deepness of your bones that you are worthy and that you are enough.

Venessa Oh, I love that. That is fantastic. I love that advice right there. So, when can folks expect to get *The Engagement Game*? When will it be out?

Joi-Marie They can get it now, they can pre-order it right now wherever books are sold but it will officially hit bookshelves on March 21st, so I'm so excited, I would love to hear from you guys. Share your excitement or your frustrations or your questions on social media using the hashtag #theengagementgame and I'm going on a book tour so I'll be hitting up New York, Chicago, Atlanta, Baltimore, DC, and I hope to see you guys there, and all of that information is on my website joimarie.com. I hope to see you guys and learn from you guys.

Venessa Excellent. So, make sure you guys go out and get *The Engagement Game*, that's dropping on the 21st, it's got lots of

good information in it. It's not self-help, it's absolutely hilarious, and I think that if you really want to know how to play this relationship game and really get confident and clear on what it is that you want, make sure that you pick it up.

Joi-Marie Thank you. Thank you so much for having me; I had such a good time.

Venessa Thanks, Joi-Marie. Talk to you soon.

Joi-Marie Okay. Bye Bye.

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