

Conversation with Margo Hendricks/Elysabeth Grace

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Margo Hendricks: Hi!

Julie Moody-Freeman: *Welcome! I'm so excited to talk with you. What I want to do then is I want to travel back in time. If we start back to the beginning when you started reading romance, how did that come about?*

MH: Honestly, I think I was reading romance and not realizing it. When I was, you know, nineteen years of age, because... I checked out books. There were some that were just called historical fiction, but they inevitably kind of ended up on a happy for now note, a few happily ever after, but they were historical, classified as historical fiction. My first real romance was WEB Dubois' *Dark Princess*. And I really think we need to revisit that text and take it out of this, kind of, out of the context of African American literature and put it in Black romance. Because so much of late nineteenth century, early twentieth century sort of novelistic writing that sought to be optimistic, sought to be positive, for Black writers often was in the genre of romance. You know it – it grappled with the, 'here's the historical conditions that would deny this love, this romance, this couple, you know, their HEA,' and yet, they succeed. So I have to say that was – probably I was around twelve/thirteen when I read that book. It, for some reason it was in my library, and for some reason I stumbled across it because I think it was listed with historical fiction. And that was my love. So my official – not contemporary but twentieth-century romance beginning, like so many people, was Kathleen Woodiwiss. I love historical romance. I read the *Wolf and the Dove* and that was it. And it was interesting because I think you will find this a familiar narrative for any writer of color and especially Black writers. When we started reading romance and the romances that were available to us because we didn't know there were these Black authors who are writing romance; when we started reading these romances, many of us started with historical, and we didn't – we managed to engage in a different kind of willing suspension of disbelief. We were willing to set aside, you know, the, what we saw as problematic from the standpoint of the construction of this world, which was very white. You know, when I looked around, my world was very Black, very Brown, very Asian. And so I'm reading a world set in, you know, basically 1066, 1067 England, the French or, you know, conquering the, you know, the English and I'm drawn into this romance. It was also a text that I don't read now. I went back and I actually, I read, read it about five years ago and it was difficult to read because of a rape scene. Because even though – maybe we can talk about this issue of the problematics around sexual abuse, sexual assault, etc, in the past, and how we engage [with] it, because I sometimes think that we do project backwards on our readings, and, you know, if you're writing certain kinds of romances, you have to, and you want to engage it, you got to treat the world as it was, because many people come to that role thinking what I'm reading is what it is. So, but that was my very first one, and then somewhere in undergraduate was when I first found Beverly Jenkins. And after that it was all over again. It was still the historicals, you know, and because there were these historicals out there for me I'm like yo, and I'm having fun. And then I moved into, you know, studying and looking at [it] more carefully and closely at contemporary romance. So by that time, I had discovered – and she will ever remain one of my favorites – Francis Ray.

JMF: *Oh, yes.*

MH: Okay, I've read everything she's written at least three times. Some of her books I've read a half a dozen times. They are my comfort reads. I will go through her series as comfort reads.

JMF: *What was it you liked about her books?*

MH: Um, for me it was the storytelling, it was setting. They are set primarily in New Mexico area. It was a recognition of a complicated Black and Native American history that sometimes often in certain areas nailed it. So I loved what she did with that. I am sure there are people who would, you know, cringe. Because, you know, they are Black romances. You know, her characters are either Native American, a couple of them are Native American or they are Black and Native American or they're Black. And so I think for me, that was an eye opener. Especially again coming from narratives that solely represented a Black couple, not mixed, but Black. And I think for me, her texts were inspiring because when I decided to write romance, it was like, okay. I'm okay writing interracial. I'm okay writing, you know, Black/Black. I'm okay; I know I can write white/white.

JMF: *Well when did you come to that realization that you wanted to write romance?*

MH: Oh, I'm somewhere around twenty-one/twenty-two.

JMF: *You knew early.*

MH: Yeah, I did. I did. But life got in the way. And when I decided to start college. Okay, so we need to [get to] my history. My personal history is I did not go to university right after high school, I decided to work. I had no clue as to what I wanted to do so I went to work. I worked for the post office first and then I went to work for banks and when I decided to go to college, I got a part time job working for the school district. Even going to college wasn't about academia. It was about becoming a lawyer. Because I worked for banks. So I said, 'I'll become a corporate lawyer because I'm smarter than half the twits that I engaged in.' I worked in corporate trust. So in dealing with investment bankers and stuff like that. And I figured I was smarter than half the people that, you know, came to the door, and I thought, you know, they make a lot of money. I could do that, make a lot of money, retire and write romance. Then I took a Renaissance English class, and the professor, you know, commented that on the fact that I was the only Black person in the class. And it was at a school, where there were, you know, there was a population of Black, Latino, Asian students, but I was the only Black person in the Renaissance class. And so she talked to me about that. And so she said, 'you know you can get a PhD'. I said, 'but I want to write romance, you know, I want to be a fiction writer. I don't want to do that.' She says, 'You know what, you can write fiction. Think about it. You teach couple of times of week. You do research; it informs your writing.' I mean, she poured it on thick. And I should have known better. But I listened. So I ended up getting a PhD, thinking that an academic job would afford me the time to write my very first romance work-in-progress draft completed novel. I wrote while I was writing my dissertation. It was the genesis. It was – no, it wasn't the genesis. It was the poorly crafted draft of *Fate's Match* and *Fate's Kiss*.

JMF: *Interesting. Can we – before we move forward, can we sort of lay out sort of a summary of what this series is? Right, I'm talking about the paranormal. We will get to the contemporary. So we've got Fate's Match, which came out – it looks like it came out 2019. Fate's Kiss and then Fate's Consort.*

MH: Right.

JMF: *Can you give us a little taste of what they are?*

MH: Sure. Yeah, um, the premise is what if John Milton in *Paradise Lost* got it wrong? What if Satan and Lucifer were twin brothers?

JMF: *Hmm.*

MH: And how would that play out in a world where fate is actually something more than just a kind of de facto state of being, but an actual player in what goes on? The series centers on the descendants of an archangel Lilith, who is a fated mate to Satan, but when she discovers that the darkness in him will destroy every living creature, she chooses to align herself with his twin brother who is older. So the book or the series deal in interesting ways on the male side with primogeniture. You know, inheritance, that sort of patriarchal idea of passing to the first son, where on the female side, it really is about where power resides. And the power resides with my heroines.

JMF: *Who all happen to all be?*

MH: African descended. Lilith chose to settle in Africa and hopefully in this final book, there's a fourth book, I will have her articulate why and chose to be specifically African and from her we see the African – they're not all African born, but they're all African descended. All my women characters have brown skin, even if they're mixed race, they have brown skin. They are also supernaturals. It is the gift that they have, and it's through them that life can be protected and saved until Fate walks there and Fate walks the earth as a Black woman in *Fate's Consort*. So Lucifer is the fated consort to Fate and what I liked about that book is it kind of turned the tables on our expectations, you know, and in this last book, she really has him, like, 'I got your number, sugar.'

JMF: *I can't wait.*

MH: And he becomes a little bit more – he's a little bit more playful. He steps back. It's not that he steps back because she's Fate, although that's part of it, but he steps back because he understands the nature of her power in terms of who she is. So my aim really was to just write these amazing supernatural Black women who were different, you know. They are shape shifters. They're telepathic. They are warriors. And that was important to me, which is why every one of them is a master swordsperson.

JMF: *Yes.*

MH: Okay, everyone, and their weapons of choice are guns or swords and daggers. So I tried in these books to give my – and these are books that are about women. They really are. They're cishet but they are not just about that relationship. They're really about these women discovering who they are, where they come from and what their role in history and on the planet is.

JMF: *Yes, so that's nice.*

MH: And then there is good sex.

JMF: *Are Lilith and Fate the same?*

MH: No.

JMF: *Okay, can you explain?*

MH: Yeah. Lilith is an archangel and so she's one of Lucifer's guardians.

JMF: *Yes because...*

MH: Her importance is she becomes the first consort to Lucifer in order for her to become human, but Lucifer isn't the father of any of Lilith's descendants. We discovered later that it is someone. It is a human.

JMF: *Oh! We will discover that in the fourth novel?*

MH: Yeah.

JMF: *All right.*

MH: Um, she has twofold purpose. One, she's very loyal to the angelic hierarchy and, two, she really loves Satan. She wants to save him, and she believes that her actions initially will ultimately save his life. But as we see, that doesn't happen. I mean, he continues through each book— he's driven by revenge. He's driven by ambition. He's driven by jealousy. He resents being a younger brother. And –

JMF: *A couple seconds.*

MH: Yes. So, you know. The last book Lilith makes a reappearance, but we know she died.

JMF: *Right. Right. Yes.*

MH: I won't tell you, but she makes a reappearance.

JMF: *All right, very good. What the title of that fourth one?*

MH: *Lilith's Heart.*

JMF: *Lilith's Heart. Uh huh. And when is [that] expected to [come out]?*

MH: Soon. I'm hoping by the end of this year.

JMF: *Very good. I guess I want to talk about when I read – when I – I think I did – I read – well, I read Fate’s Kiss and Fate’s Consort before I read Fate’s Match. Okay. And when I read Fate’s Kiss I felt I was home.*

MH: Octavia Butler all over that book, didn’t you?

JMF: *Exactly. She can transform into animals, fly. I was just like this, and I called you and I was like this reminds me of Wild Seed.*

MH: That was the influence. That was it for, and I knew... I love that book. I taught it for years. I really wish more people would come back to that series. Yes, because especially within the context of – if I was still teaching, that would be at the center of me teaching basically sixteenth and seventeenth century English literature, with respect to settler-colonialism and the United States and so on, and, you know, English America, because that book is so powerful. Yes, in terms of its critique of everything that was wrong with settler-colonialism and the enslavement of African peoples. At the same time, it was an incredible romance. Oh my god, oh my god. I’m like, ‘you guys, you’ve got Anyanwu and Doro.

JMF: *With a character that could only live by killing. Yes, yes. That was the only way Doro could live.*

MH: Exactly.

JMF: *She had to come to understand that.*

MH: And that was the thing and so of course, it was me, like, can I write this slightly differently? Can I tweak this a little bit? And – but, yeah, *Wild Seed* is this all over this. The other thing that inspired me to do, which if you remember, there’s a moment in which Anyanwu becomes a white male.

JMF: *Yes, oh yes. I remember that distinctly because she is looking at slaves.*

MH: Yes.

JMF: *She is looking at slaves, right, and the slave came up and said [incomplete thought]. Is that what scene you are talking about?*

MH: Yeah, yeah. And it struck me there. In my academic book on romance, I explore this issue of, you know, the white passing. That is, this Blackness that is visible through a certain lens that misreads not Blackness but misreads whiteness, and so I’m, you know, I’m attempting to understand what it is that requires markers, and it seemed to me that that book [*Wild Seed*] inspired me to think about what it means to be able to become other than what you are. And so when I started, when I wrote *Fate’s Match* and continued into *Fate’s Consort*, it was important for me for my male characters to also be of African ancestry. And so, you know, you might miss it, but Michael Drake in *Fate’s Match*, his mother is Algerian. Right, okay. Gabriel’s mother is also Algerian. And it was important for me that we

understand that the emphasis on the external can miss the internal and that's what *Wild Seed* taught me so much, and I wanted to see if I could capture that.

JMF: *Yeah, I'm glad, I'm glad you said that, because that's what I was going to ask you, you know, in the same way Butler is critiquing settler-colonialism, etc. Do you think that your work – you know, because you were a Shakespeare scholar, do you think that your work pushes the boundaries? I mean, you know, I'm thinking of that young person where the professor said to you you're the only Black person in the class. Do you see that sort of coming out in your work?*

MH: It always comes out in my work. It always does. It's complicated because again, I was an older student, and I grew up in a community where the awareness of who I am as a Black person has never been absolutely conflicted. There are times when there's, like, you know, my family they're from Alabama, they wouldn't take me down with them and they said, because I didn't know how to shut up. They were afraid. I'm – it was in the 60s. I didn't –

JMF: *Grow up. Did you grow up on the west coast?*

MH: I grew up in California.

JMF: *I heard this story before from people who grew up in California and went to the South.*

MH: And, you know, imagine that the height of the Civil Rights movement, you know, this... I was outspoken in Riverside and my teachers would send notes home because I would question. And so, you know, my grandmother, my great grandmother, I really wanted to go with her. And she was like, 'no, baby. Not happening. I'm not gonna lose you, you know, and I'm not gonna die trying to protect you. So we're just gonna stay here.' Um, my father, who is also from Alabama, when it came time for me to meet my paternal grandmother, she came to California. I never got to know her in Alabama. And so there's this confidence that I think I have that enabled me to be that, you know, that single person in the classroom in the Renaissance class. To pursue a degree to stay true to, 'this is what I'm going to work on. I'm working on gender. I'm going to work on race issues. I'm a historical materialist. I'm not going to be held by, you know, period boundaries. I'm gonna be all over the map if I choose.' I'm... but I was older and I had experiences and an upbringing that led me to make those kinds of decisions, and I think I bring that to my romance. *Fate's Consort* was written first.

JMF: *Oh!*

MH: I told you, I don't do things linear. You want a linear person, you – you're not looking at her. And I wrote it in during NaNoWriMo. 50,000 words in 30 days. And so I submitted it to a press. The editor wanted me to turn it into a ménage. I said, 'that's not what it is'.

JMF: *Oh with Satan and Lucifer and –*

MH: And Analyse. And I said, 'no, that's not what it is'.

JMF: *They are brothers.*

MH: I mean, I think the editor didn't want it. And I think that was just a way to say, 'I still support diversity, but,' to be honest. And let's just say this particular press I have absolutely no respect [for], so I put it aside and went to work on *Your Heart Only*.

JMF: *Huh.*

MH: And then I came back to it and wrote *Fate's Match* and then I wrote *Fate's Kiss*.

JMF: *Oh, that's interesting.*

MH: So, um, I wanted to do [it] because I constructed the backstory, and it seemed to me that the backstory was so important that they needed to be books themselves.

JMF: *Yes.*

MH: And then when I wrote *Fate's Match* – I can't end here because I left open the possibility of continuation. And so I went to my old historical romance and pulled characters from there to create *Fate's Kiss*.

JMF: *Yes, because I felt when I was reading Fate's Match, I felt like – I felt like I was supposed to know some of these people. So I'm glad. Oh, this is good.*

MH: Yeah, um, I – there's a historical. I wrote two historicals. The first one which I used probably mostly characters and setting for *Fate's Kiss*. So that whole Barbados moment and whatnot was within the first historical that I wrote. The second historical, because the Daughters of Saria originally supposed to be just a historical romance. It wasn't supposed to be paranormal anything. The second book is where you meet Asiya So at the end of *Fate's Consort* when Gabriel goes to visit Asiya and Cadan – Assia and Cadan's story isn't a traditional historical romance. So I am actually going to rework that and publish that so that you actually get to see that this is all interconnected for me. Yes. That there's worlds. There's a natural world and there's a supernatural world. And then there's probably some worlds that we don't even know about. And I think that's the lovely thing about romance and the romance genre is that our worlds can be whatever we want. We can have them cross each other in ways where it's believable.

JMF: *Yeah.*

MH: So that's kind of the, the history there. And then *Your Heart Only* I got sucked back into academia, because I took some time off. I walked away. And I was reading, I came across, you know, a reference as always to Shakespeare's, you know, sonnets, and the Dark Mistress of the sonnets and whatnot. And I decided what if – what if there were letters? And what if a Black Shakespearean found those letters? Um, and that's how that book came into being and then that one has led me into – I love writing about romance. So, and that's kind of the Francis Ray Native and Black mixed people.

JMF: *Because Aiden is mixed.*

MH: Yes. Yes. What she [Francis Ray] did was to balance the two. In her books where her characters, you know, were both Native and Black. I had my – I had the Graywolfs identify as Black. Because of the mother. You'll get more of that story as we go. But because of the mother not being tribally enrolled. Mm hmm. Okay. I'm sorry. Yeah, I think it's the [mother]. I have to go back and think about how I did it, but the whole question of being tribally enrolled, But – and for them to be tribally enrolled, but the whole sort of tension between – quite honestly, how some Native tribes deal with their Black members, and Black people who are of Indigenous origins. There's a lot of tension there because a lot of the tribes – the colorism is a factor. And I didn't want to get too political in the books, 'cause of course in my community romance, but I had the Graywolf children consciously identify Black. They don't reject their Indian heritage, their Indian genealogies, and lineage. They consciously identify as Black Americans.

JMF: *Right.*

MH: And so, you know, it's like, here's a choice. And what they do is on that projection. It's not that they ignore what goes on tribally. It's just they choose to walk this particular path. And that, to me, I think, is one of the differences there is that I make that statement a little clearer.

JMF: *So are you working on, um...?*

MH: Yeah.

JMF: *A Contemporary? Another contemporary?*

MH: This one has Aiden's brother Jason and Dani. Yes, yes. So this is about them and this one I'm having fun with, although I am kind of stuck because this is a forced proximity friends to enemies to lovers.

JMF: *Right.*

MH: And then the historical that I'm planning for next year is strictly Elizabethan and it's two Black women. And they solve a mystery.

JMF: *Okay. All right. All right, you're teasing me.*

MH: I'm trying to get people to understand that history did not start in the nineteenth century. And I know that Black history has been around forever and that Black history is not just looking at Africa. You know that – that people, you know, descendants of Africans, that people of African heritage and lineage and genealogies have been all over the place. If I, you know, it's like – there's no country in Western Europe in the sixteenth century, major cities that you could walk about and not see someone who was of African descent, native born but of African descent. And so I'm trying to singlehandedly right now do my best to,

you know, say, look. That's because I have the academic credentials, you know, and I love a romance and trying to, you know, do that. And I think that's so important to Black romance. Yes. You know, I think it's so important for us to understand that our history didn't begin with emancipation or decolonization. You know that if we are writing, you know, even African romance writers, there's a long history of romance and Black love, you know, that's been around. We just need to find the stories.

JMF: *Yeah. Well, thank you. So you're helping me to close out Season One. It's been a wonderful run for me but I am happy that you're with me. But this season will not end because I'm collaborating with you on a special issue for the Journal of Popular Romance Studies. You want to talk a little about our special issue?*

MH: I'm excited.

JMF: *Me too, me too. I'm trying to act calm.*

MH: No, just be enthusiastic. Right now the attention that Black romance is getting is doing my heart proud as an academic. Because when I taught, I had no – I had no critical studies to fall back on, to be honest, except those written by white authors who honestly didn't attend to what writers were doing and saying within Black romance from the Black community. What makes me, like, 'I'm so excited!' is that we get to engage these writers as writers, as romance writers. We hear their voices. The podcast – I'm, like, floored by just how powerful these romance writers are. I'm contributed an essay, and it is on Beverly Jenkins and I'm just, like, I've set aside a time where when I turn to that one, it's just me and Bev sitting in a room. I'm playing with her, and I'm having a blast. But I also recognize that this is an amazing moment because we're actually honoring these romance writers who have in their own ways over the last – I'm going to say decade, and definitely the last three to four years, have fundamentally changed romance and Romancelandia.

JMF: *Right.*

MH: Their voices, their writing, their presence means Black romance can no longer be just shoved aside. I mean, people could do it, but they won't get away with it. It can no longer be shoved aside, ignored, and treated as a niche category as if it's not romance. It doesn't mean that there isn't a struggle about how we define it, but these are the voices that have made it possible for us to collaborate to be honest.

JMF: *Right, and it's – and, you know, and through the interviews with Vivian Stevens, how much her work as an editor transformed an industry.*

MH: Yes, yes. And the fact that, you know, without Ms Stephens, there would not be a Romance Writers of America organization. Don't get me wrong. That is a very problematic organization that is trying to figure itself out. And it has not been kind to Black authors. Um. But you see Black romance authors fighting to keep the organization that she had a hand in creating, that she was a driving force behind. I'm trying to do something to maintain that legacy, so I just see this volume as acknowledging a genealogy, a literary genealogy, a

romance genealogy, and a Black woman's genealogy. It's recognizing a legacy that should have been recognized long before now.

JMF: *Yeah.*

MH: I'm grateful to you for letting me play with you on this.

JMF: *But – I'm – but I'm also seeing this as just a start because there's so much more. So, for example, talking with Rochelle Alers, she named, you know, Karen Thomas and Veronica Mixon, and she went on and on with the women and, you know, this is just a little teaser so that people listen to the podcast, but you'll hear her name. People we aren't even going to be able to feature in this particular issue of the journal.*

MH: Right.

JMF: *It's just a start, right? And it's a beautiful start, so that we can build it – build a history.*

MH: I know. I think what's important about this issue again – so this is me speaking as an academic. I think what's important about the issue is, like I said, for the first time, I'm really seeing a growing presence of academic research on Black romance. Not African American literature, not Black fiction, but Black romance. On the Black romance genre. And I think that will change things. I think we will begin to see bibliographies come out. I think we will begin to learn more about writers.

JMF: *Yes, yes. So I am so looking forward to – so I'm looking forward to my collaboration with Margo Hendricks, but I also hope that Elysabeth Grace will finish her fourth paranormal.*

MH: Okay. So what Elysabeth Grace says right now is that once I send the book to the editor, I will send a copy to you as a beta reader. Does that – will that work?

JMF: *I think that will help.*

MH: It's almost done.

JMF: *It'll help to shut me up. I have patience, I have a little patience.*

MH: Yes. You are so good. I got other people going, 'get that book out.'

JMF: *Well, Margo, thank you so much for being here with me. I appreciate it.*

MH: Thank you so much for talking to me. This has been fun.

JMF: *I will not say goodbye. I will say until we... until we meet again.*

MH: Yes. Yes.