

Transcription for Episode 71: Interview with Morgan Jerkins

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JENNIFER: Hello and welcome to the latest episode of the Minorities in Publishing podcast. This is Jenn, and for new and returning listeners, you may know you can find the podcast on Twitter @minoritiesinpub, or on Tumblr at minoritiesinpublishing.tumblr.com, and well as iTunes, Google Play, and TuneIn. Today's episode, as of recording, it is still 2017, but by the time you will be listening, it will be the pub day for Morgan Jerkin's debut, *This Will Be My Undoing: Living at the Intersection of Black, Female, and Feminist in (White) America*. Morgan is also the associate editor at Catapult, recently promoted. Many congrats.

MORGAN: Thank you.

JENNIFER: I'm really glad we're getting to talk before the holidays.

MORGAN: Me too.

JENNIFER: It's kind of like a year-end review

MORGAN: It also feels like a little bit of a lull, like you have to slow down, so I'm really appreciating the time.

JENNIFER: I'm really glad to have Morgan on, because she's been a longtime supporter. She's a fantastic writer. I have a lot of admiration for the work that she does for her viewpoint and her skill as a writer, and for your honesty of what your experiences have been in the industry, outside of the industry, as a woman coming into herself. If that's fair to say. I mean, I'm 36 and I still feel like I'm growing up.

MORGAN: Thank you. Thank you so much. Yeah, I feel like I just have to be honest. I'm not a good liar anyway.

JENNIFER: That's why you do nonfiction?

MORGAN: Oh, no I do fiction as well, but I'm talking about lying when I'm talking about something that is pertaining to my life so clearly. So if we're talking about being a minority in publishing, I can't lie to you, because I'm doing a disservice to you. If I'm

writing a book that's a novel, and I talk about...but in an interview such as this one, I will be honest with you if it relates to my life, because otherwise, some other Black girl is going to hear this story and they're going to think something completely false, and I did a disservice to them.

JENNIFER: And I want to get into that, because your debut, it's memoir-esque. It's a memoir, it's essays, it's personal essays that kind of read as a kind of timeline. Because it's not literally linear, but it does follow a certain path as you're getting older and experiencing certain things — sexuality, relationships, education — entering the field of publishing and all that stuff. But I also want to get into something that you've been very open about as well, in addition to many other things, is your entry into publishing, which may seem redundant to people who do know you, who follow you, who have read the book, who will read the book as of this posting, is you've talking a lot about the barriers of entry, especially being someone who went to an Ivy League.

MORGAN: When I was in college, I think around junior or senior year, I had this plan in mind that me and a friend, a close friend of mine who I'm still close to to this day, would graduate from Princeton, my alma mater, and we would get jobs in the pub world, whether it was as an editorial assistant at a publishing house, or a literary agent's assistant. Somewhere entry-level. We would live in Secaucus [? 00:03:27] . I don't know why we chose that. We were going to live there and live out our lives and get discovered the "organic way," quote unquote, in terms of being in a publishing house, a literary agency, and then discovering our work and those sorts of things. It didn't happen that way. I started commuting to New York multiple times throughout my senior year to interview for positions, entry-level positions. Mind you, when I would go on websites, it would say, "Ideally someone with a literature background, a four year college degree, list your favorite books." Very standard. I thought to myself, I must have it in the bag, because I have an Ivy League college degree, I've had three unpaid literary internships — I think three unpaid literary...but unpaid internships, a couple of them. I spoke five foreign languages in addition to English, and I had a comparative literature background. I went to these meetings expecting something, and I got nothing. I went to New York for these day-long trips for 15-minute interviews and I wouldn't even get a call back. It devastated me emotionally. I remember even getting rejected from a job on the day of my baccalaureate because the editor told me that my literary interests didn't match hers, and this was after I was supposed to critique a manuscript, and they gave it to me a day late.

JENNIFER: I've been there. I remember those.

MORGAN: I was working on it in the midst of graduation practices, and I still got rejected, and so I went back home to my mother's house in New Jersey. And on top of that, I thought I was falling in love with this guy. I talk about it in my book. That went to

crap as well, in a horrendous way. So I felt worthless professionally, romantically, all of the above. The only thing that was keeping me sane in a sense, that made me realize that I still had some talent, was that I was accepted into an MFA program at Bennington, and that's what helped me, because it was a low-residency program, and I was only on campus twice a year for ten days each. I was just at home. I was tutoring perhaps five or six hours a week at most, I was taking ballroom dancing lessons to stave off depression, and I was on the internet a lot. I saw so much content being exchanged, and I thought, "Oh, people can write online, or people can get paid online. I think I want to do this!" Now mind you, about a couple of weeks before I graduated, I did write a piece for Ebony about privilege at Princeton and all that. It was a response to a white student there that talked about privilege and whatnot. So, I thought, maybe I should just do this more. I should flex this muscle. So I just jumped into the deep end, so to speak. I didn't have any mentors at the time who said, "Here are your contacts and here's how to write a pitch." I just learned through rejection. I made my entry into the digital world at a very auspicious time, on two accounts: The first account was because of Michael Brown's murder and the beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement. Editors were now hungry for Black voices. The second account was many women were gaining their foothold in the digital media world through confessional essays, so if you look at my work in 2014, early 2015, you will see that so much of it is op-eds on police brutality and Black lives, as well as confessional essays. Because editors were hungry for that. So I told myself...I had a mantra in my head. I said, I may not be the best writer out there, but I going to work harder than the best writer. I'm going to be the writer who editors know can produce a 1000-word essay in under 45 minutes. I'm going to be the one who's reliable, who can turn in quick copy, and be that person that they can rely on. That's what I did. I wanted my name to be any and everywhere. So that's what happened. In the beginning it was like, okay, if I can publish one piece a month, I'll be great. Then it started becoming two pieces a month, or maybe two pieces one month, one piece the next one, then three pieces the month after that. Then editors started to contact me. Around summer 2015, I moved to New York, I applied for a job at Catapult. Didn't think I was going to get it because there was still one part of me who was still debilitated or traumatized by all I had gone through the previous year, and I went in there, told them what I could do, told them the contacts that I had, other people I knew on the internet that could write certain things, and then I was offered a job two days later. From there, it's been a whirlwind of writing for bigger publications, working with other editors, having more editorial responsibilities at Catapult, and even though three years is not a long time in hindsight, it does feel like it in the digital media world because so much is changing, the landscape is changing so much. In the meantime, I have done pitch workshops where I've taught emerging writers how to pitch, because now that the media industry is so volatile, I don't know the avenues that were available for me three years ago are there anymore, or at least not as wide. So I was doing that for a little bit.

JENNIFER: Can you speak a bit to the vibe you got when you were going on these initial interviews, in terms of the response? You mentioned that one lady said, “Your book interests aren’t that same as mine.” But were you kind of getting a vibe of “something’s off here,” or “I’m not sure,” or “this seems to be going well, and it feels like lip service?”

MORGAN: I never got a bad vibe. Every time I went into a meeting, they were always impressed with me. They were always like, “Tell me about your time at Princeton. Why did you choose to learn Japanese and Russian? Why did you choose to learn Japanese and Russian literatures? What do you like to do for fun?” I never got the vibe that I was unqualified. So that’s why it always threw me for a tailspin whenever I wouldn’t hear any updates on whether or not I got the job, but would always have to figure it out through silence.

JENNIFER: And then there’s the whole “you’re overqualified,” right? So the assumption for some jobs is, well, you have so much experience, you’ll get bored, so therefore you won’t want this job. They’re making this decision for you, rather than accepting that you’re there for a reason.

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MORGAN: Right. At that time I never thought I was overqualified. I thought I had to be the best. I had to be over and above because I was Black. I never shook hands with another editorial assistant who was not a white woman. So I knew that I had to have an Ivy League degree. I had to be multilingual, because what Black people, I think, will consider “over,” I thought that was just the minimum for the white publishing world. My sense of measurement was completely skewed. Or completely right on the ball, depending on who you ask

JENNIFER: That’s true. Because it’s not shocking. You know what I mean? It’s not shocking, but it’s mind-boggling in the sense that even when you excel, you cannot get that job.

MORGAN: I think it’s a lesson that every person of color and Black woman learns sooner or later in her life. That you can have...you could be above and beyond, and you could know you could do the job well, but sometimes you’re just not what they’re looking for, for certain reasons that are not necessarily tied to your experience. It might be tied to your race or aesthetic or whatever have you. And so, that was just a lesson I learned early on. Granted — I guess I can say this now with an optimistic viewpoint because I am where I am — I know that in retrospect those jobs weren’t for me. Maybe I would not have flourished. Because I will put it like this: If I would have gotten a job the traditional route, I would not have as big of a profile or portfolio as I do now.

Because perhaps I needed that year-long time at my mother's house in rural/semi-suburban New Jersey to really focus and develop my voice online, and develop my brand or whatever, and my website.

JENNIFER: So, did you find mentorship after, once all these editors were coming to you?

MORGAN: Yes, I think it happened pretty organically. I found mentors. But I also reached out to people. I reached out to people: "Hey, I like what you're doing. Can we hang out sometime?" One of the women who provided a blurb for my book, Porochista Khakpour, I emailed her, found out she lived in the same neighborhood as me, and then she took me out for burgers. It was very organic.

JENNIFER: I also wonder about the people who aren't as proactive. I could also see you're very proactive. You're not someone who sits around and twiddles the thumbs. I'm not trying to make a case against people who may just not know because they do not have access. I feel that that's a different thing. But there's also that necessity for proactivity. Because you just know something needs to happen.

MORGAN: Yeah, I tell people all the time: I don't ask for permission. That is what has helped me tremendously, is to not ask for permission. Especially as a Black woman. Because if you do, you're going to be waiting around for a very long time, and what you might get is not necessarily what you want. So if I know I want to write for this publication, I will find their contact and I will tell them, "Hey I want to write for you." Or if I know that I want to profile this person, I will find that person's email address, say, "Hey, here's my name. This is where I've written for. This is my Catapult background. I would love to write for you." These are the things that I do.

JENNIFER: Well, getting on back to that, because you're an editor, and you receive these submissions as well. I can imagine you've received some very tactless, unprofessional, not well structured...I'm not saying name names... But being on that end of being the person who's proactive and saying, this is who I am, this is what I'm about, hire me. Not maybe saying "hire me," but alluding to that through the way you enter that discussion, and then when you receive materials, what are some of the bad examples?

MORGAN: I don't know if it's rude, but do you want to know some of my pet peeves?

JENNIFER: Sure.

MORGAN: I cannot stand when people address me as "Jenkins." My name is Morgan Jerkins. It says it on my Twitter. It says it on my website. It's right on the cover of my

book. It's in my Catapult email. Why do people still call me "Jenkins, Morgan Jenkins?" I'll sometimes sign, "Best, Morgan Jerkins." Why do they say, "Dear Ms Jenkins?" It's actually the most offensive thing to me, and I know it could be so much worse, but I cannot stand when people do that. This is just a rule of thumb for not just me as an editor, but for other people as well, when you're pitching an editor and say, "What do you want from me?" What do I want from you? You know what I'm saying?

JENNIFER: That's so audacious.

MORGAN: Do you see what I mean? What do you mean, what do I want from you? That's what you're supposed to tell me. You have to give me a story, and what do you want to convey to our readers, so when you say, "What do you want from me," that is a question that someone should be asking when I specifically reach out to them and say, "I would like you to write about this topic or this series that we're discussing." Or to go off the cuff and say, "What do you want from me?" It's like, I don't know!

JENNIFER: I received something, I don't know what...sent me a Google Doc, and it was unfinished, and it had all these comments in it in red that said, "And then add/insert this later." It was a woman of color, so then I feel...ugh. I want to prioritize PoCs, marginalized people, but then you're sending me something that is not done.

MORGAN: Right! And that's hard, isn't it? Because you know not everyone has the same access as you. And you want to help, but you're just one person, you don't have the bill for everything, so that's the thing. When people send me, "I want to talk about this or that," I'm like, but that's not a pitch! I want to give you this website that might help you, but that's not a pitch.

JENNIFER: Do you also think that because people follow you, and I feel your presence is... "inviting" isn't the right word...I'm not saying you push people away, but you do engage. You do engage in dialogues with certain things that are of interest to you, so I think maybe people think...whenever anyone's online, I really think that people think everyone is approachable because you're online and you're public.

MORGAN: Maybe that's it.

JENNIFER: I wonder if people approach you in a way...I'm not saying no one does that to all editors. All editors experience that, but I also wonder if people feel like, "Well, Morgan's a sister girl. She gets it. I don't have to try that hard."

MORGAN: Yes, maybe. I actually want to talk about that, more about the approachability, because how do I put this? There was a moment where white women

would pitch me, but they would talk to me in a way that Black women would talk to me. Does that make sense?

JENNIFER: Yes.

MORGAN: Like, in a colloquial way, and I found it very, very disrespectful. This is not just an influence of being a Black woman and knowing your boundaries a little bit too much, but also because I think about... In Japanese, for example the way that you talk to someone is different depending on their age, and their status to you. So for example, the way that I talk to a friend of mine, I can use a casual form of speaking. The way that I would talk to Michelle Obama would have this honorific form. Because if I didn't, that would be disrespectful to her, because if I tried to use casual form with her, it's basically saying that we're on the same level, and we're not. So when white women pitch me and they may use colloquial speech or some type of African American slang, it's like, you would not do this to a white woman. You wouldn't! So why would you do this to me, because I'm an editor, I'm not someone who is your girlfriend. I'm not someone who you're just shooting the breeze with in a coffee shop. Why would you do that? I feel weird because...you know what it is, it's that ever great conversation of good intentions. You know, you think you want to assume the good in people. You want to assume they're not trying to offend you. You want to try to assume their intentions are good, but because we know the world, and we exist in a certain space, we also know you chose that because you want to be funny, but that funniness comes from you thinking you can just talk to us when it's almost like talking down to us. But then if we say that out loud...I guess I'll speak for me: Sometimes when I think that, I'm like, maybe I'm being too hard on people. It's that second guessing that reminds me just how much of a Black woman I am. Just how much that constant inquiry, of whether or not I'm thinking too hard, whether or not I'm being paranoid. All of that is...I think defines...not defines, but partially characterizes, my experience as a Black woman, is that second guessing, that double-thought, that doublespeak, that paranoia, that anxiety over other people's encroachment upon my space, whether it's professional space or personal. I hope that made sense.

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JENNIFER: Yeah. That also touches upon a portion of your book, of those kind of tenets of, you're not crazy. You're not crazy. These reminders, it's not you. It's not you, it's society.

MORGAN: Right! So much of that makes up our lives. Can you imagine what the world would be like, or what a Black woman's world would be like, if she never second guessed herself? Every time she thought something, she just accepted that to be her

truth, her reality. What would that world even look like? That might be a story idea, I don't know.

JENNIFER: There you go. Take it and roll with it. But it reiterated the fact that it's necessary to have, especially more Black women in the industry, and your agent is Monica Odom, who was an early guest on the podcast. You mentioned beforehand that you had a really good relationship with one another, and going into selling your book, selling a book that's so specifically about your body, the Black body, all these things and all these topics, how do you approach that in a way that is kind of affirming, considering we do have these tendencies to second guess ourselves, even when we're kind of formidable in our, "No, this is how I am as a writer"? The shields aren't concrete.

MORGAN: I've been very fortunate enough to have an agent that never made me second guess my ambition and what I would like to accomplish in a book. So, talking to her was great. I think because she was the one...she's like my ally. When you're working in traditional publishing, your agent is supposed to be your ally, your cheerleader, supposed to be rooting for you, for your money, and all those sorts of things that you always can't see. It was great to have her in my corner, and to say, "Why don't you write about Black women." I guess. Initially, I was like, I don't know...maybe?

JENNIFER: Really?

MORGAN: I always thought of myself as a fiction writer. I went to Bennington for fiction. I got into writing short stories. I came into writing as a place to hide. This is something I also go into in my book, but I went into writing because I was getting harassed at school on a daily basis and I wanted to create a new world through which I could escape. So to write about myself so plainly... Even to this day when I think about what I've disclosed in my book, I was like, wow. I sort of shocked my own self. To me that says that I did a good thing. It makes me feel good.

JENNIFER: Getting to your book again, what struck me also is, before cracking it open, is the subtitle. That distinction of saying "white America," and where that came from.

MORGAN: I didn't come up with the subtitle. The subtitle was figured out later on. Because "This Will Be My Undoing" is pretty vague by itself, so it completely encapsulated what I wanted to talk about which was: How do you live at this intersection? How? Where do you start? I think it wrapped up what I wanted to say very succinctly. You can thank my editor for that one, though.

JENNIFER: I'm impressed. They actually went there. I feel like with a book like yours, you kind of have to be all on the table, and not kind of be like, "Well we can just make Morgan our, you know, our Black representative, and not have to say stuff about whiteness."

MORGAN: I'm going to be honest with you, I literally had this pep talk with myself and I said, "Listen, girl, you only got one shot at the debut, so you better stick to it." That's how I did. I remember finishing the last chapter, and I just sat in my bed — that's where I work — and looked at the Google Doc, and I said to myself, "You did a good job."

JENNIFER: Good.

MORGAN: Nowhere throughout my career have I ever looked at a piece of my writing and said to myself explicitly and plainly as that: You did a good job. There's no chapter in the book that I look at and I say I could have gone a little bit harder. No. Not at all. Every single chapter was like taking an orange and just squeezing it. So that's what I think. I'm sure once I get older, maybe, when I have children of my own, I'll look back at that, and I'll go, "Oh my god, I don't know if I'll let my daughter see this. I don't know what to show her." I don't think I'll look back at this and be embarrassed. I'll look back and be like, "Damn. She had a lot of spunk." I was very proud of myself.

JENNIFER: That's great. It's good to hear that there wasn't anxiety after sending it in, saying, "Oh my gosh, what have I done?"

MORGAN: Oh, no, there was anxiety. There's always anxiety, because there are things that I've disclosed in that book that I haven't even disclosed to my mother. And my mother is one of the closest people to me. Things I haven't disclosed to friends that I've had for over a decade. There's always anxiety, because once it's out of my hands, I don't know what people are going to say about it. They might read one paragraph and be completely turned off, and say, "Well, she's so and so, she's that." But what I hope is that people stay with me past discomfort, to see the evolution that I try to depict in this book.

JENNIFER: I feel like it's one of the most specific renditions of a Black woman's life, and an analysis of that life, especially being very, very aware of being in a Black body, and being in a Black woman's body. So it is not a book...I think, that's a credit to you, absolutely, because obviously you created it, but also to the publisher. Not to pat a publisher on the back, but to recognize that you don't necessarily want to pull these things apart when you're talking about labiaplasty, when you're talking about relationships, and sex, and going to Russia, going overseas, being in an Ivy League, what Michelle Obama means to us as a representative, as a human being, wanting to be white and reconciling with that too.

MORGAN: Right. I wanted to make it specifically clear in the book — I cannot speak for every Black woman's experience, so I had to make that clear. I'm speaking from one experience. It's one. I hope that it will illuminate certain things, but it cannot illuminate all things. I don't know everybody's experience. Yeah. I think it was just a matter of, what are the key moments of my life when I knew I was a Black girl, or Black woman? Just talk about it and try to not make it so much in a bubble, because we don't live in a bubble, and to try to tie it back to something bigger.

JENNIFER: You do always tie it back, bringing back the historical, where the context of issues comes from. It's also, I think, for the uninitiated.

MORGAN: That sounds kind of ominous.

JENNIFER: For the uninitiated, it's "Oh, that's why you don't like that!" Or, "Oh, that's where that comes from." Not educational, but putting it on the line of, you need to understand that this is what the issue is. It's actually funny, I was reading your book on the subway, and this woman said — she was looking at the cover, and I'm sure it's mainly that she was like, "A Black woman is on the cover!"

MORGAN: It was Black woman you were sitting next to.

JENNIFER: No, it was a white woman. It was a white woman. And she said, "Is this book good for kids?"

MORGAN: Oh, god no.

JENNIFER: And my mind went immediately to little, little kids, you know? I was like, "Oh, no." I was at the labiaplasty, and I was like, "No, no. Not for the babies, no." But then she said, "I teach teenagers, high school." And I said, "Oh, well that's different." I said, "I think it depends on their reading level." Not to demean the kinds and say, if you're reading at a sixth...I mean what are they used to discussing, what are they used to being in the school? Because schools have their stringent things too. I'm like, is the school going to be weird about it? That's my question: Is the school going to be weird about it?

MORGAN: Is the school like a high school?

JENNIFER: Yeah, a high school.

MORGAN: Oh. Here's the thing. Kids these days are different. I guess because I live in New York, it's even more so, but they know things. Anything that I'm talking about in

that book, from the age of, I'd say 14 and up, they know exactly what I'm talking about. I can almost guarantee you that. I think it might make certain administrators blush, particularly in the Bible Belt region, yes, but I mean, trust me, nothing that I'm saying in there...I could understand if this were 2001, but this is 2017. Kids are not the same anymore, trust me. I go on the subway and I see high school kids curse better than any 35-yr-old I've ever met. That's not to say that means they're mature. Let me make that distinction. I think in terms of how high school students will engage... I think the first chapter of my book when I talk about high school and I talk about...I think any high school student can and should read that, and I do think they can engage critically with that. When I start getting into Black girl magic or Rachel Dolezal, maybe not so much, but I'm not going to count them out. But I do think any of the material that I bring up, whether it's about sexuality, "fast tailed girl," things like that, I don't think any of that is going to be a shocker to them whatsoever.

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JENNIFER: Also, it's another indication of censorship.

MORGAN: Yes.

JENNIFER: I will clearly say "censorship" in this case, because I feel as though sexuality specifically is not discussed for females, like our sexuality, our pleasure is not discussed, and you talk about that in your book as well, of this kind of...the performative aspect of it.

MORGAN: The performative aspect of...?

JENNIFER: Of intimacy. Heterosexual. I should emphasize heterosexual.

MORGAN: Yes, emphasize that.

JENNIFER: For Black women and cisgender heterosexual men. I feel that is something a lot of women deal with, and maybe if you're lucky, you don't deal with it. You don't deal with it in receiving pleasure, or going years without receiving pleasure for whatever reason, but I think that would be heavily censored. You know, they want the feel-good stuff for young readers. They're like, "We need it to be inspiring. We need it to be Disney-esque."

MORGAN: Yes! And I cannot. That's the part where I know I'm going to have people talking about what I disclose about my dating life, or the dating experiences that I've had, because what I've found in my experience — and granted, I do not speak for every Black woman, I want to just keep saying that, I can't speak for them — but from

the Black women I've met, the Black women who have it going on, the Black women who have graduated from certain schools, or just the Black women that have an opinion, there's this anxiety about whether or not we're too much. Too much. Then we're bombarded with all the things we do wrong, about why — I'm talking about heterosexual Black women — what we do wrong and why we can't get a man. I really wanted to elucidate that as much as possible in my book, of how much that has affected me, even to the last sentence, the last word. I make it known [inaudible 00:33:26] I was so afraid I was going to affect my dating life, because when you come from a culture that loves your success as a writer, but also knows how the world is to Black women with opinions, the Black women who are on their grind who also have opinions...the world is not always kind. Men aren't always kind. They'll use...they can — not all the time — they can use those things, those assets that you worked hard to cultivate, against you in a moment when they don't get what they want. That's what I want to make sure. It's hard. It is terribly hard.

JENNIFER: It is. And it's something a lot of us speak about. We always speak about this, because...or maybe on the back end we speak about it, and maybe not as much...I know I don't talk about my dating life publicly. I've written essays that I'm still drafting about coming into sexuality in different ways, but not so much the dating, the frustrations of dating, because it is frustrating. It's the most frustrating thing when you know you have your book coming out, you're in the New Yorker, you interview Issa Rae, and that dude's totally intimidated by that.

MORGAN: You know what, that's the hard part, because I'm single. I had to do a lot this year. I'm very open about my life in that way. It also helps to liberate me. Why should it come from a place of shame? It's just who I am. What I will say is that I never wanted to believe that men were intimidated by me. I never did. I never wanted to believe that because I thought, listen, the majority of men I come across, they're the ones making more money than me. They're the ones with the more stable jobs. I thought, well why are you intimidated by me? You're taller. All these things. I kept getting these signals. Sometimes other women, like, "This guy might be intimidated by you." So now I need to feel bad for my accomplishments? And I'll just put this out there — I'm in a very good spot right now where I just believe that the right guy, the right person for you, is not going to be intimidated. When I first started dating, I just wanted to be loved so badly. I wanted to prove to my family and my community that I could be this Ivy League-educated woman with the world at her feet and I could have somebody. I wasn't too much of anything. I could be opinionated, and I could be living in my fullness, and have somebody. Now, I want to have somebody, but not for anyone else. If you have an issue with what I do, the stuff that makes me happy, profiling these people as you say, they're not the one for me. But it took me...I had to go through those horrific, traumatic experiences with guys, unfortunately, to get to that place. I wish it could have been simpler, but I had to learn.

JENNIFER: You're still in your twenties, and you learned. I think you're on a decent track, in comparison. It sucks, period, that you had to go through any of it.

MORGAN: Right. I remember when I was writing that chapter, I kind of felt pathetic. I'm like, I'm telling these people basically how many rejections I've gone through, how much I wanted to be loved and wanted, and how much I sacrificed for that. But I told them. Somebody has to hear that. I'm sorry. I didn't have men on speed dial. I didn't have dates every single day of the week. A lot of my dates when I was actively dating was through so much anxiety, because I just wanted to prove to people that I could be who I am and also be desirable, whereas now, it's like, I know who I am but are you desirable to me? You see what I mean?

JENNIFER: It's a necessary distinction.

MORGAN: It is. I thank therapy for that. But I also had to write that, because I feel like when women do discuss these experience, particularly Black women, we're called bitter, as if bitter is not about emotion, as if bitter just completely compromises our perception of the world and the men who we interact with, as if that just destroys our credibility. That's something that I hope we can do away with. Particularly when reading my book, is that, so what if I'm bitter? Could you blame me, with the stuff that I've heard, from the experience I've had? Even if I was bitter, that's not any less of an emotion than being angry or sad. I'm allowed to have that. Let me have that. The difference is, is that I don't wallow in it. But I have to experience that. I had to submerge myself in that for a little bit, and I'm thankful that I was able to pull myself out, but I'm allowed, as a human being, as a woman, as a Black woman, to be bitter if I want to about a negative experience. It should not be used against me in any sort of way, whether it's mockery or facetiousness.

JENNIFER: Like you said, it's a valid emotion. And again, it points the finger at the wrong person. I don't want to sit here and be like, "Victim, victimizer," but I do want to note the influence of how someone purports themselves to be and how they are, and how people see themselves, because people don't see themselves as someone...I don't want to make it as flippant as bad guy/good guy. It isn't. But there is a point when someone is inflicting harm.

MORGAN: That's the thing, what I wanted to show people, is that these people have hurt me, but these people are nuanced, and these people have growing to do. They have an undoing as well. The only problem is that we don't have to see it, and I'm showing you mine. So I wanted to make sure in the book that I wasn't just talking about, this person was bad, this person did me wrong, and leave it at that. I wanted to provide the full context of what only I could give, while also giving nuance, because

that's what we're made of as human beings. Even myself, as a subject, aside from being the narrator, myself as a protagonist in these different essays, so many contradictions, so many hypocrisies. Because that's who I am as a human being, and I feel like I'm allowed to have that in my own frigging book. You know what I'm saying? I feel like that's also what I want to tell people. A lot of these essays, it's not just a straight, linear path of consciousness.

[00:40:26]

JENNIFER: It's not a Joel Osteen book, people.

MORGAN: The thing is, it's not a linear path to consciousness. It's not a linear path to triumph. It's sure as heck is not a linear path to pride, and who I am as a Black woman. It's very jagged, but that's what I think makes it a thrilling ride. No story that you hear, whether it's fictitious or true, does not come with plot twists, turns, corkscrews, reversals, fast-tracks, all sort of things.

JENNIFER: What I think about in terms of...you mentioned therapy — because I've done therapy too and I credit it a lot — is this constant analysis, right? I remember Roxane Gay had spoken about this years ago in regards to nonfiction writing specifically, is the victim motif, and just when we saw, like you said, the confessional essays, we saw a lot of victim essays.

MORGAN: What do you mean?

JENNIFER: "This person did this to me."

MORGAN: Oh, okay.

JENNIFER: "Me and my parents never got along." "My boyfriend did this." Especially from men, it was interesting. I saw a couple. "I only date white women. Here's why." They're not reflective pieces. So you've got to get where I'm coming from. It's not, "Let me analyze my role," it's just, "Hear me out." You know what I mean? Maybe I should call it that: "Just hear me out" essays.

MORGAN: I think the fundamental blocks of a great essay, personal essay, is self-interrogation. Sometimes it's hard to accomplish that when you're coming from a place of pain, and also when you don't have a very astute editor.

JENNIFER: And entitlement.

MORGAN: What did you say?

JENNIFER: And entitlement.

MORGAN: And entitlement. Thank you, yeah. I think there have been times when I've been receiving pitches at Catapult where I've had to turn down essays because I knew — I just felt, like, a vibration in the pitch itself, and not in a good way. It wasn't apparent passion, it was something else. And I knew. It was like, I don't think the author's ready yet. It's up to my discretion, but I will say that when you're trying to write a personal essay, you have to be ready to go there. You have to be ready to look at the situation. It's not just a matter of pointing fingers. You have to self-interrogate. That's what makes it a personal essay. You have to do inquiry. Some people just aren't ready yet, and they may never get there. Yeah. It's a lot, because you have a responsibility. You have to place demand on yourself.

JENNIFER: And the subjects.

MORGAN: And the subjects.

JENNIFER: And the subjects, but you do refer to your parents, and you do refer to the people you dated. There are all these players in our lives. There are so many more stories to tell. When you're writing this, yes, it's personal, did you have them look at it before it became ARC?

MORGAN: No! No, because...I write about my mother. I say about the things she said, but I don't think I casted her in a bad light, because a lot of times when I wrote about her it wasn't about her personal life. It was mainly things she's done to try to protect me, whether or not they were problematic. She's also a Black woman. When I wrote about my step-father, my step-father passed, and the way I wrote about him was not derogatory whatsoever. The way I wrote about the men that I've dated, we don't talk anymore. Honestly, I don't care what they think. It's my story. I stuck to it as best as I can. It wasn't a matter of fabricating things like saying what happened, how I interpreted it. A lot of times — how do I put this? — a lot of times when I write about these situations when the person is still alive, I made sure to say, "Here's how I felt. Here's how this is contextualized, why I interpreted it this way." So that no one looks at this person and says he's automatically bad, or she's this. Even when I talk about my bully, I don't people to automatically say she's a hundred percent bad.

JENNIFER: So as a writer, from a craft standpoint — because again we can thank therapy for our respective self-reflections — but also in terms of actually writing the essay, because there was a barrage of these types of essays that I felt, especially in digital media, of just random-ass stuff.

MORGAN: Random in what way?

JENNIFER: In Jezebel, there was the one where the woman wrote about the person who committed suicide, and she was glad that she committed suicide.

MORGAN: Oh, no, that was xoJane. I remember that.

JENNIFER: Okay. Sorry, Jezebel. Sorry, Jezebel. Didn't mean to put you in that lot.

MORGAN: That would be xoJane. I remember that day.

JENNIFER: Yeah, those kinds of pieces. Yes, bad editing, but also, just holy crap, why would you think that was a good idea to write about that? These people aren't new writers, you know what I mean? In certain contexts, these people aren't just roll-out-of-bed, decide-to-be-a-writer-today. They have bylines. From your end of a craft perspective, how were you sitting there, writing these essays? Again, this a book you sold with an agent, stuff like that, but you also wrote this before you sold your book.

MORGAN: I never wrote something as grotesque as that.

JENNIFER: Definitely not.

MORGAN: If I were writing about...the thing about it was I made sure I was the center. I wasn't writing about a friend's death, and making it so heartless, or bringing up anything illegal, potentially illegal, or incriminating. A lot of the stuff was my experience. Granted, I had changed names and descriptions in order to protect these people, legally-speaking. I never worried about, is this too bad on them? Should they be allowed to tell their side? They can tell their side if they want to, but this was how I reacted to these experiences, and how I second guessed myself, and what does it mean about my life, and things that people said to me.

JENNIFER: There's also an intuitiveness to it too, I think, that consideration. You made yourself the focus, but people can make themselves the focus of the wrong things

MORGAN: Right. Absolutely. So, I think it's just...when I was writing about dating or whatever, I never really really worried...what if...because I didn't want to guess myself. When I was writing these experiences, it was so vivid in my mind. Almost like I was reliving it all over again. That's how I realized how much it affected me.

JENNIFER: And how is that to write, when you're reliving it?

MORGAN: It was hard. I remember when I finished the last draft, final draft, I cried. Not because I regret anything, but I remember when I was talking to my friend about it, she told me, she said, “It’s because you’re mourning your former selves. You’re mourning your former selves.” When she said that, I said to myself, “You’re right.” I’m mourning those women, those multiple girls and women that I used to be.

JENNIFER: That’s deep.

MORGAN: Yeah, right? I’ll remember that always.

JENNIFER: You mentioned...we were talking a little before about celebrating and taking a moment to actually celebrate your accomplishments, but being that you do freelance, you work at Catapult, but you are an ongoing freelance writer, there’s so much go, go go about the job. And the constant...I hate calling it a hustle, and I said this in an earlier episode where I spoke to Arigon about...writing shouldn’t be a hustle. You’re being paid for a job. I understand that to get the work is hustling, but to be compensated for the work that you do isn’t a hustle, because it’s deserved recognition.

MORGAN: But it is so much of a hustle, because sometimes the jobs are scarce, sometimes the money isn’t there. I hate that it has to be called that, though. I do. I do. It just sounds so weird, but it kind of... My career’s been a hustle.

JENNIFER: You’re taking...you went on two trips in 2017, let me say again, and that was...I don’t know, was that downtime for you? Was that kind of, “Let me luxuriate in being in a new space, and eating, and not checking email?”

MORGAN: I was checking email. I was checking email, but I also, I liked having that moment for me. It didn’t matter that I was a writer. It didn’t even matter if I had a name, because I really wasn’t speaking to people throughout the day. It felt good to be able to center myself and do whatever I want, not to worry about New York media, or bylines, or whatever. I loved it, because these are memories for me. I remember I spoke to an older woman about it. She said, “You know your life is going to change as you get older. You’re going to have more responsibilities to other people, and you need to take this time for you,” and that’s why I love doing solo trips, because these are memories that I have. When I was in Paris, I did a dinner cruise. I initially paid for just to be on the cruise, and then I realized I wasn’t going to be near the window, and I was like, no! If I’m going to be on a dinner cruise, I’m going to be near the window! So I was near a window. I was the only single person there, and I had a whole course dinner myself, a bottle of wine by myself — I didn’t drink the whole thing, but just had it there — and we met near the Eiffel Tower, we were traveling along the Seine River, and I just said, this is for me. This is all for me, and nobody is taking that away from me. That felt really good.

[00:50:54]

JENNIFER: Is that a form of self-care for you?

MORGAN: Yes.

JENNIFER: And what other methods...you mentioned the French macaroons at the [inaudible 00:51:05]. Did you go to the Macaroon Parlour?

MORGAN: Oh my god! Yes!

JENNIFER: You did? I love that place. Did you get the Earl Grey?

MORGAN: I'm afraid to try Earl Grey.

JENNIFER: It was so good though. If you like earl grey tea. If you don't then I wouldn't recommend it.

MORGAN: But I do like Earl Grey, but I don't want it as a cookie.

JENNIFER: It's good though! That's one of the signatures at Macaroon Parlour. That's one of their signatures.

MORGAN: Well, I'll try it out, or we can go together.

JENNIFER: Yes, buy you a bunch for your launch party.

MORGAN: Yes! I really want somebody to buy me one. Please buy me my favorite decadent cookies.

JENNIFER: Yes, she loves them. No allergies. But we were walking about that on our panel on the Well-Read Black Girl, and we all had our iterations, and some of them kind of melded together, just being offline, or not talking about certain things, or being aware, being with the right communities, and with your book coming out, and with the topics that you were writing about, do continue to write about, are there aspects of going back to celebration as well as self-care, kind of putting that together, and not forgetting your freelance life, but kind of just doing something to extricate yourself from it to enjoy the work you've done?

MORGAN: Besides eating, I know I sound like a glutton.

JENNIFER: I do it too. I eat. Eating is lovely. I love it. It's glorious.

MORGAN: I have moments, a lot of downtime, and I just say to myself, this is my life, and I'm living it, and I feel very blessed, and it's it's weird...I know this sounds really cheesy, but sometimes I'll be in the subway, and I'll close my eyes, and I'll just have this overwhelming peace about where I am, in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the city, and I'll be like, that's my celebration. It doesn't always have to be confetti, it doesn't always have to be everything around me. Me celebrating me is waking up every morning and doing exactly what I love to do every day. That's celebrating: Me finding a great movie on Netflix that I didn't think I was going to find. That's celebrating. Me getting a piece of cake before this interview. That's celebrating me. I started to learn that life can be a series of mini-celebrations. It doesn't always have to be a birthday or an engagement or a book. It can be, I interviewed someone I really wanted to interview, or this piece went viral. "You know what, I'm going to have a glass of wine tonight," or something. I think that's what keeps me leveled as a writer, to remind myself that I always should be celebrating me. Because I'm living the life that I've always wanted.

JENNIFER: We don't need to wait for that celebration from other people. We can do it ourselves.

MORGAN: Yeah! A lot of celebrating, I do it by myself. I think it's an important...like, "Oh my god, am I doing too many things alone?" I've definitely had that anxiety too.

JENNIFER: Me and my mom are big loner people. I'm also an only child. You're the youngest of five?

MORGAN: I have four older sisters.

JENNIFER: So you're the youngest. I don't know if that has something to do with it, but I'm an only child, so I was always, like, I'm fine being alone. This is great. This is cool.

MORGAN: Yeah. For me, I guess it's also maybe because I'm also single, so I'm also like, "Oh my gosh, I'm doing too many things alone. Should I just go on Tinder and find somebody to go with?" But I'm like, no! If I see only me doing this, then I just want me to do it! Why do I have to do stuff with someone else? Is that because of me being a woman? Do men have this feeling?

JENNIFER: Some might. I don't know if all do. My ex-husband was like that. He hated being alone.

MORGAN: My ideal marriage, we live in the same house, we sleep in the same bed, but yet we could be on total opposite sides of our home, and not see each other all day long. Me and my mom get along like that. We will meet with each other at breakfast, be on opposite sides of the house for the whole day, and then reconvene at night. We're not...it's not offensive. We just know we need a lot of downtime.

JENNIFER: Yep, sounds familiar. Maybe on that snowy day, when I'm not doing anything and have no deadlines, we can cuddle up.

MORGAN: No, we can cuddle up, but just make sure that you know that from the hours of noon to 5pm, I'm no good. I'm just not. That's why we scheduled this meeting for tonight, because I'm alert and ready to go.

JENNIFER: So you're a night person.

MORGAN: From the hours of like 7:30am to noon, I am sharp. And then I'm sharp from like 5:30 to like midnight. I'm just sharp. You could talk about anything, but from 12 to 5pm? Whew.

JENNIFER: That kind of midday slump.

MORGAN: It's a midday slump. That's why I love being a freelancer, because I get my time all scheduled.

JENNIFER: Mine is dictated by the Man. We're in the midday slump, and I'm not caffeinated enough today, but I am alert for this interview. Just a reminder, *This Will Be My Undoing*, as of the time you hear this, will be out. You can order it, Amazon, Indie Bound, Request Request [? 00:57:04], and I'm sure Morgan will be Tweeting and posting all about launches and where you're going to be, and speaking at, and all that good stuff.

MORGAN: Yes, soon to be. I was about to say soon to be announced, but it'll already be announced when the interview comes out. Yes, I'm really excited. Please buy my book.

JENNIFER: It's a really good book. I heartily... This is something we didn't get to talk about, but I was talking to Vashti Harrison about her book *Little Leaders*, which is a New York Times bestseller. Yay! First week.

MORGAN: Yay!

JENNIFER: And how it's a book about women, *Bold Women in Black History*, that's the subtitle. People are like, "This is a great book for girls! This is a great book for girls!" Because it is, it's for the girls, to encourage the girls, but also, these are good books for men. It is good for men to read feminist work.

MORGAN: Absolutely.

JENNIFER: Maybe it's not for them, in the vein of lemonade is not for white people...

MORGAN: That doesn't mean you shouldn't...okay. I want to talk about that before we go.

JENNIFER: Yes, please.

MORGAN: Because something is not for you doesn't mean that you can't watch it. I feel like people of color have watched things that were not intended for them since the beginning of time. So that's why when I think about...this book is written by a Black woman, it's for Black women, I don't know if it's for me. No, you still need to read it. Because, guaranteed that people of your same identity have done something to affect the way that we as Black women perceive ourselves in the world. So, yes, you do need to read it, just like I read Joan Didion, I read...who else? There's so many others.

JENNIFER: Yeah, Updike.

MORGAN: Salman Rushdie. Just because...you know what I mean? So?

JENNIFER: I do encourage men to read this, because maybe it'll gain some empathy. Maybe it'll just piss you off because you're all in your feelings. I don't know.

MORGAN: But let me tell you something.

JENNIFER: Because you know people are going to be in their feelings.

MORGAN: And I know that, but let me tell you something. Whenever you're in your feelings about something that is not directed to you specifically, that is a great place to investigate why. That is a place to investigate. [Inaudible [00:59:29] because why? Because I'm talking about misogyny? Or misogynoir? Or sexism? That you so not...you're not on the short end of? Why does that bother you? I was going to say that a hit dog will holler, but no, I won't go there, because I don't know y'all like that. I don't know y'all, but I will just say that if you feel hurt by a man by reading what I say, that's a good way to investigate that, that's a good way to discuss that, rather than, "Oh, she's bitter." Something dismissive. Because I'm not dismissing y'all.

[01:00:01]

JENNIFER: Exactly, and then re-listen to the first 30 minutes where we broke down why the word “bitter” is an inaccuracy.

MORGAN: I won’t say “bitter” is an inaccuracy, what I’m saying is it shouldn’t be dismissed. It’s as valid an emotion as everything else, but somehow, “bitter” is so attached to a Black woman, and it’s seen as something to make fun of, and to invalidate her experiences.

JENNIFER: Sorry, but I wanted to ask, do you think it’s also on par with the word “sensitive”? Like, when people say, “You’re being too sensitive.”

MORGAN: No. I don’t. I think “bitter”, from my experience — let me make sure I just say that — “bitter” is so tied to bitter Black women, strong Black women, bitter Black women. When it’s, “You’re so sensitive,” I feel like, for me, the way I interpret it, and I could be wrong, it’s rather tied to women, period. Not Black women. But being bitter is so loaded towards Black women. It is loaded. It’s just like, strong. It’s so loaded when you’re talking about Black women. “Sensitive”, it’s more for...it feels like it just collapses under women in general. But that’s just the way I interpret it.

JENNIFER: I hear you. I hear you. Because I look at those words and how much we experience them, and sometimes it feels as though anger is always valid, and then I wonder, well, we have a right to be upset or angry, and maybe that is bitter, or maybe it’s not bitter. Maybe that’s just anger and frustration.

MORGAN: And why not?

JENNIFER: It’s synonymous, and that’s totally valid That’s a totally valid feeling, and I wonder why that word is the one that is always used, just like the word “sensitive”, because they’re both used to brush us off in a way.

MORGAN: Well, you want to know why? Because I think it’s a discursive tactic in order to alleviate the responsibilities of other people, because if you start asking, “Why is this woman feeling this way? Where did she learn that? Who did this?” Then it takes less of the burden off her and puts more of the responsibility on other people to do better. But we don’t ask other people to do better. It’s always the Black woman’s burden to look after herself and other Black women. But who looks out for us if we don’t look out for us?

JENNIFER: That conversation came up again. I mean, it's always up in our neck of the woods, but as of this recording, it's two days after the Alabama senator race and the stats went up, the stats that went up, but everyone was like, "Well, thanks, Black women," and we're just like, "Here we go again." Same time, different channel.

MORGAN: Exactly. But we already know the story. The sad part is, why is it always being repeated? How many times do we have to go through this? Why do Black women have to keep "saving" other people?

JENNIFER: Through our own interests, because we're protecting our own interests, which are human interests.

MORGAN: Right. But who's protecting us? That's the thing. Who is protecting us?

JENNIFER: Black women. Black women. That's who I call. So again, *This Will Be My Undoing*, January 30th, which should be today, if you're listening to the podcast, even though it's still 2017 in our world.

MORGAN: Now we're just cutting up.

JENNIFER: Morgan, how may people reach out to you, besides buying the book, as they should buy the book. But how may people reach out to — and not necessarily to pitch you if you don't want to be pitched — but to engage and follow you in what your doing?

MORGAN: Reach out to me on Twitter. It's just my name: Morgan Jerkins. Jerkins, not Jenkins. It's just @morganjerkins. My Instagram is _morganjerkins, all lowercase, or you can...my website is just www.morgan-jerkins.com.

JENNIFER: That's J-E-R-K-I-N-S.

MORGAN: Thank you. Say that to the people. Let them know.

JENNIFER: I was called "Jessica" in a pitch, and I was like, seriously?

MORGAN: It's like...it's...my name is right there.

JENNIFER: It's in the email. You typed it out.

MORGAN: I feel like I'm the one that's going to be an ice queen if I'm like, "Listen, my name is right there. Why do you keep calling me Jenkins?"

JENNIFER: I'm going to put at the top of the episode, like, "Biggest pet peeve: She is not Morgan Jenkins."

MORGAN: Please, I'm telling you. Please. Don't make me be that person. Please!

JENNIFER: And you can listen to the podcast at iTunes, Google Play, TuneIn, on Tumblr at minoritiesinpublishing.tumblr.com, Twitter @minoritiesinpub.

[01:05:13]