

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Sally Holloway

JVN [00:00:00] [SINGS] Welcome to Getting Curious! [STOPS SINGING] I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by returning guest Sally Holloway, where I ask her: What's the steamy history of Valentine's Day? Ah, I love that! Welcome back to Getting Curious! Oh my God, I'm so excited. I just got chills on my triceps because we have such a good episode today. [SINGING] We're learning about stuff! You know I love a history episode. Which: are we going to officially petition in 2023 for it to be changed to "herstory"? I just think, let's get back into Latin. Let's, like, change it for the way that it should be. But I digress, that's for a different episode. Today, you cannot walk through a drugstore almost, like, anywhere in January or February without seeing a Valentine's Day card, without being bombarded with this, you know, [BRITISH ACCENT] love emotion. I was going to try to do that thing in Moulin Rouge—"This ridiculous obsession with love!" But was this holiday always this big of a deal and this commercial? On this week's episode, we are exploring the *herstory* of Valentine's Day with a guest that is so close to our hearts, Dr. Sally Holloway. If you have been under a Getting Curious rock, Dr. Sally Holloway is a historian of Gender, Emotions, and Visual and Material Culture in Britain—and the world—over the long 18th and 19th centuries. She joined us last year for an incredible episode all about love and courtship in Georgian England. It was our Bridgerton-inspired episode, like, learned so much, can't get over it. She's the author of *The Game of Love in Georgian England: Courtship, Emotions and Material Culture*. And she's currently working on another book all about heartbreak. Dr. Sally Holloway, how are you?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:01:43] I'm good, thank you. Thank you for having me back on.

JVN [00:01:46] Can I tell you a brief side story?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:01:48] Please!

JVN [00:01:49] I literally found this ring from a vintage jewelry shop, and it's from Georgian England. And I wore it today for this episode.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:01:56] What?!

JVN [00:01:57] It's literally, like, a gajillion years old. It's, like, from literal Georgian England. It's giving, like, 18th century, like, construction. But let's get down with our bad selves before we travel back centuries, we've got to hear about your past year. How are you? What have you been up to? Catch us up.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:02:15] I'm good, thank you. I've just finished writing something about the role of food and food gifts in the process of courtship. I'm starting some new work on the

history of proposals, so how people propose marriage in practice. Increasingly from the 18th century, they might do that in writing. So we've got tens of thousands of written proposals in the archives that no one's really studied before. And then, like you said, I've been writing my new book on heartbreak.

JVN [00:02:46] Ah! We're going to have you back to talk about the heartbreak book, because I got so many questions about it and, like, if it was such a rocking, like, Adele, like, "I'm losing you!" like, moment or if it used to be more, like, "Ah! I just..." Ah! It also is bringing up, like, Edith when she gets jilted at the altar. I'm not going to get distracted, Jonathan, but I just cannot wait for that book. Is there anything you can, like, tease or spoil for us about, like, Georgian heartbreak that you've learned that you just find really fascinating so far?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:03:11] So far what I've been focusing on are the sorts of rituals that people went through. So, like, when your relationship ended, what did you physically do to bring it to a close? And for most people, that was returning their gifts, returning letters or burning them. So I've been studying this one couple who, in the 1780s, he proposed to her, but then he withdrew it a few months later because she was so ill. He said that she was in no fit state to become a wife because she wouldn't be able to bear him children, he was thinking.

JVN [00:03:42] Well, God damn. Thank God she found out before she jumped in bed with his ass because, like, he wasn't even, like, about it for the sickness and health thing.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:03:50] No, exactly. But it's really sad because, you know, she wrote back talking about how devastated she was and she never married. He went and married someone else. She remained single for the rest of her life. But the irony is they died the same year. She lived just as long as he did in the end.

JVN [00:04:05] Ah! I always have to ask about this: have you found any, like, archival letters about, like, when someone proposed but then, like, their gay lover—, or because it was so treacherous, like, to be discovered being gay then that, like, they're just, like, really hard to find a gay letter? Or have you found any, like, gay letters yet?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:04:23] Yes. There are a fair few and also diaries as well, like, there are a few accounts of two women having a marrying ceremony, for example, and exchanging rings and pledging themselves to each other. So they do survive.

JVN [00:04:38] What year?!

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:04:40] Actually there's a book. It's out by Rachel Hope Cleves. It's called *Charity and Sylvia*. And they're in America. You should read it, it's a really amazing book.

JVN [00:04:47] Oh, my God! It makes me sad that even after all these years and all the different historians who've explained to me, like, what the long centuries mean, and no matter

how many times, it takes me 30 minutes and then we usually cut it out of the episode anyway, because I go through this, like, quarterly. If you're challenged with, like, centuries to the actual years that they are like me, and we were saying, like, the long 18th century, really, those would be like, -ish, you know, give or take the years from ____, to ____. Like from X to what?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:05:14] From Glorious Revolution, 1688 to end of the Napoleonic Wars, 1815.

JVN [00:05:22] 1815! Okay! I'm not a murderer. But if I was a murderer, the secret room that they would find in my house would be, like, a whiteboard full of, like, "18th century equals 1700s." Like, it would just be, like, that written, like, like, just, like, what centuries mean, like, everywhere. Because it's what I can't wrap my head around. But then, like, the long 18th century, like, give or take is, like, the...

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:05:47] Essentially, it's the period from the tail end of the 17th century, right through the 18th century to the opening decades of the 19th century, it's mainly the 1700s. But if you're talking about the Georgians, you would say 1714 to 1830.

JVN [00:06:06] Okay, great. Comment 1A and 1B. 1A: your fucking sweater with flowers is so goddamn cute. 2023 I'm, like, over not complimenting, like, I'm into complimenting now. And I just, I always have been and I'm not going to fight on my podcast anymore. But yeah, great sweater.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:06:16] Thank you.

JVN [00:06:17] And then, what do we keep in mind when we discuss this era?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:06:20] The era is really important for studying the history of romantic relationships and the history of Valentine's Day, particularly, because it witnessed a number of major social changes. So it saw the growth of towns and cities, the growth of shops and shopping as a leisure activity. So the verb "shopping" was coined during this period. People would talk about going "a-shopping." The spread of literacy – meaning more people could write letters and then later send cards to one another. And then finally, it saw the celebration of romantic love as a really important cultural ideal, particularly love within marriage, which was presented as a key route to, to lasting happiness.

JVN [00:07:01] Because, like, prior to that, were marriages more, like, in Europe, like, more arranged? Or for, like, familial, like, more business-minded? Like, it wasn't really, like, thought of like a love thing. Like, you're lucky if it turned into love, but it wasn't necessarily the point.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:07:14] Yeah, it wasn't the be all and end all that it became in that it was okay to have love develop later on for many people. Whereas in the 18th century, love before marriage was very much the sort of must have, prerequisite of a marriage.

JVN [00:07:29] So this is really the time in history where, like, our modern day notions of love start to really crystallize and take shape. At least when I was growing up, that was very much the thing. I do feel like now, like, young people especially are, like, "We are giving poly, we are giving open, we are giving, like, multiple ways," which is, like, fierce, but it still is in many places, like, very much, like, that. Do you think that's fair to say?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:07:51] Yes. And it's also *the* period, I think, when Valentine's Day emerges as a modern celebration. It's a crucial sort of bridge between the older sort of early modern rituals and the modern commercial Valentine's Day.

JVN [00:08:06] Let's get into it, it's time for Valentine's Day. It's interesting for me at 35 because, like, I feel like I've experienced Valentine's Days in lots of ways: like, single, furious, happy, on drugs, not on drugs. Like, you know, listening to the breakup song. Really not listening to the breakup song. Like, you know, super feeling hopeless. I haven't done it divorced, knock on wood, and hopefully I, like, won't, so, like, not saying that I've experienced it in every way, but, like, I have had a variation of experiences with Valentine's Day. Is this holiday, like, really named after Saint Valentine and who is that?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:08:40] So yes, it is named after Saint Valentine. But no, he didn't have anything to do with love or romance or dating and so on.

JVN [00:08:49] Was he about, like, pillaging and stuff? Was he, like, not cool? Or was he, like —, well, he was a Saint! But who knows anymore.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:08:55] Yeah, yeah, yeah, he wasn't, he wasn't pillaging. More, you know, preaching.

JVN [00:08:59] Yes. More, like, Christian pillaging, which is, like, a different kind. Yeah. Ah, because even Mother Teresa, honey, we learned. She was, she ran a... she was hardcore, 'kay? We talked to two of her, like, former nuns, really intense. That little lady packed a wallop. Okay. So was the holiday originally about love then, or was it about, like... was it about being, like, not a slut?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:09:20] Well, it was originally a feast day. It was in the 14th century that it first became associated with love. And that's because of poets, like Geoffrey Chaucer, started to describe the 14th of February as marking the onset of spring, which is why I thought I'd wear my spring jumper. It's a time of blossoming and romance. They talked about how birds would, you know, shake off the winter, welcome the summer sun, and choose their mates for the year. And the irony of that is that it's still absolutely bloody freezing in England in February. You know, it's snowing here at the moment. The average temperature in February is about 7°C. But it stuck! And the day after that became associated with, with pairing and mating rituals.

JVN [00:10:04] Coming from the middle of America where it's very cold in February, I get that. It's, like, the first time that you see the high be, like, 44F. You're, like, "Oh my God, I'm wearing shorts." And then you just, like, really hope that it's going to, like, get warm faster. But then it, like, is going to probably still be really cold and snowy until like March or whatever. So, so in the 1300s, it starts to become more associated with, like, you know, spring, budding, picking your mate, like, love things, which is really cute. What about that little bare-bottomed cupid running around in their little white sash, like, shooting people with arrows? Like, is that a long 18th century thing?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:10:36] So Cupid, he was a Roman god of love and affection. So, you know, as soon as people started associating it with coupling and mating and so on, then, you know, Cupid was sort of part and parcel of that.

JVN [00:10:48] When does it become, like, "Honey, did you get your card for your love?" [SALLY LAUGHS] Like, were people obsessed with the new holiday or were they, like, "[GRUMBLES] This is stupid." And then it became popular?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:11:58] So we do have, like, occasional examples of people sending presents on Valentine's Day over the 15th and 16th centuries. So they might send a bit of jewelry or maybe a traditional romantic gift like gloves, but it wasn't widespread, and it was only in the 17th century that it seems to have become really popular among people of all social classes. And that's when you might meet to do something really fun, like having a Valentine's lottery to celebrate the day.

JVN [00:11:30] Ah, that's cute! Is that, like, a Valentine's Day potluck with lots of couples or something?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:11:36] So If you'd go and have a lottery, okay, you'd meet on Valentine's Eve, which is on the 13th of February. And you'd all put your names in a hat and then you'd all draw a name from a hat, and that person was your valentine. So you didn't choose who you wanted—

JVN [00:11:50] Oh!

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:11:51] You'd get one by chance. And then the men would pin the names to their hats, and the women would pin it to their bodices, and they'd all dance around and be merry. And the men would write poems for the women, sort of celebrating their love. I can show you one, actually! Do you want to see?

JVN [00:12:09] Yes!

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:12:10] This is a poem that was written from someone called Benjamin Pender to a woman called Kate, and it was written for a lottery, so he would have picked her name out of a hat. So she was his Valentine. It's from 1723 and then he would have written her this poem.

JVN [00:12:26] Fuck! That's 300 years ago to this year.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:12:29] It's incredible that it survived because it's ephemera, you know. You know, like bus tickets or receipts today—the sort of thing that you'd chuck away. You know, he would have picked her name out of a hat, written this poem, which somehow has survived.

JVN [00:12:42] What's he say?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:12:43] It says, "Since on this day each bird doth choose his mate," like I was saying, "So I make choice of you, my charming Kate 'til Easter next my Valentine to be and ever after that adored by me."

JVN [00:12:57] How fucking cute is that? Okay. Not to be a nightmare who clearly listens to Morbid podcast a lot. Was there ever, like, a time when, like, when these Valentine's lotteries turned deadly.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:13:09] I love how that's where you go after seeing this.

JVN [00:13:12] The calligraphy of it or whatever is really giving, like, violent murderer. But then when you read it, it's sweet. But, like, I just associate those writings with, like, murder because of Jack the Ripper. Do you not?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:13:22] Just look at this beautiful romantic token, Jonathan, and then think about bloody murders? This is what 18th century handwriting looks like, murder or no murder.

JVN [00:13:31] It's very beautiful. It's very, yes, you're right. And it's not murder-y. Also, this is the time when you said, like, Valentine's Day is, like, a popular thing by the 1600s, or at least we have evidence historically of it happening, like, across social classes, like, by the 1600s.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:13:50] Yeah. Visitors to England said that "Much to-do" was made of Valentine's Day "by high and low and rich and poor." So rich people were taking part in lotteries, poor people were. By this point, it had become a genuinely popular festival.

JVN [00:14:03] So that Valentine's Day lottery thing it's, like, if you were already happily in a couple you wouldn't be going to that. So it was really kind of at first, like, more for single

people? Or would you be in a couple and still go to a Valentine's thing and then get, like, a different valentine?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:14:16] Yeah. So you could be married and still draw a valentine. It was just a bit of fun, but, you know, associated with misrule and, you know, communal festivity and dancing and, you know...

JVN [00:14:28] What if someone picked a valentine and then they cheated on their spouse and then wanted to divorce them in that time? That just never happened?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:14:35] Well, it wasn't really to do with sex.

JVN [00:14:37] [BRITISH ACCENT] But isn't everything about sex, darling, or was it really not, then?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:14:41] Not really, no! If you were married, you could still take part in a Valentine's lottery, you know, pick a valentine. A child could be your valentine.

JVN [00:14:48] Oh!

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:14:49] It was about, you know, celebrating neighborliness, families.

JVN [00:14:53] Oh that's cute!

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:14:54] Yeah, it was sort of, I wouldn't say sexless, but it wasn't about sex in the way that, you know, people might think it is today, you know, going out for a nice meal and—

JVN [00:15:05] [BRITISH ACCENT] A snog.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:15:06] And exchanging presents.

JVN [00:15:07] Yes, of course – with a light snogging after. Okay, so if you had a crush, like, was this the time of year when people would be, like, “Will you be my Valentine and, like, not go to the lottery,” because, like, they had a crush on them or...

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:15:20] Well, there's some really interesting superstitions from the time and there's some quite funny stories of people taking part in them. So some people believed your Valentine was the first person you saw on the morning of the 14th of February and you have to greet them with a kiss. And so there's some funny stories like there's a diarist called Samuel Pepys in the 17th century, and he wrote in his diary about how his wife was walking around the house with her hands over her eyes so that she couldn't see the painter and decorators because she didn't want to have a painter for her valentine.

JVN [00:15:54] [CHUCKLES] Aw, that's cute.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:15:56] And he talks about knocking on a friend's door on the morning of the 14th of February and refusing to go in until he was told whether there was a man or a woman on the other side, because he wanted to make sure he had a woman for his valentine.

JVN [00:16:08] So same-sex valentines can be a thing if you drew a guy and you were a guy, or if you're a girl and a girl? Do you just say, like, "I have fun!" Like, "It's Galentine's Day!" Or, it's, like, "My Best Friend's Day."

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:16:18] I think men drew women and women and men. But you could—I think women certainly did—send Valentine cards later on to their friends.

JVN [00:16:27] Cute! You write that the holiday evolved in the late 1700s, early 1800s. What set this era of Valentine's Day apart from the earlier celebrations?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:16:38] So earlier on, you might take part in a lottery. Children were much more involved in the celebration. They might go knocking on doors, asking for presents and singing songs, and they'd sing things like "Morrow, Morrow, Valentine / First it's yours and then it's mine / So please give me a valentine." So it's more about sort of neighbors and families and lotteries. But then over the course of the 18th century, these communal parts of the celebration declined. And instead, people, especially people of higher status and those in urban areas, they wanted to choose a valentine themselves. It was less about having someone come to you by chance and more about selecting one person who was going to be *your* valentine in the sense that we would understand it today.

JVN [00:17:26] That's cute! So what kind of, like, social and cultural factors led to that? Like, just more money, like, just more self-determination? Like what, what kind of led to that?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:17:39] So firstly, the church was trying to suppress what they saw as un-Christian, sacrilegious, superstitious rituals. And Valentine's Day was one of those things that was associated with paganism and heathenism. So the clergy worked very hard to suppress Valentine's Day rituals in that sense. At the same time, writers and philosophers of what we call the "Enlightenment," so it's a philosophical movement across Europe and America, where people were defining themselves as being in a new age of reason. The motto of the Enlightenment was "dare to know." And in emphasizing the importance of reason and rationality in opposition to superstition, Valentine's Day and celebrations like that were sort of recast as being ridiculous. You know, they were superstitious. They were incompatible with the new age of reason. And writers argued that Valentine's Day was only something for children and fools because it was associated with dreams and predicting a future husband and luck rather than reason. And then also, most importantly, there was a celebration of the ideology of romantic love. It was celebrated as a force for good. "The reason for all the good in the

world," people wrote. And people wanted to marry for love because it was seen as essential for their long-term happiness. And I mean, you'll know about the importance that people attach to happiness in the later 18th century from things like the Declaration of Independence. Right? So it talks about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. So there it followed, therefore, that people wanted to choose their valentines themselves to secure their long term happiness rather than leaving it up to chance.

JVN [00:19:29] So that whole, like, monarchy, like, Bridgerton, like, "It's her debut season," or whatever. Is that going on kind of at the same time? Because isn't Bridgerton, like, 18...

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:19:39] So over the 18th century, social elites withdrew from these communal practices like lotteries and would have been more interested in choosing one valentine for themselves and perhaps, you know, sending them a card, for example.

JVN [00:20:00] When I think about, like, the nineties, it's, like, I think about, like, the way that the Internet changed the economy. Last year, we talked about, like, the post office and the printing press, and its kind of role in changing things at that time, 'cause it also, like, shifted economy and how people buy things, how people access information, etc. But how did the rise of the post office and the printing press—those innovations—how did they affect Valentine's Day?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:20:22] So the 18th century saw a boom in all different kinds of printed paper goods. So newspapers, pamphlets, satirical prints, trade cards—which are like business cards today—printed writing papers, and greetings cards, most importantly. And they changed how people celebrated Valentine's Day because it meant that you could buy a Valentine card from a shop instead of having to make it yourself. They were quite cheap to buy from a shop. It would only cost you a few pence. And I suppose it was a desirable consumer object, but at the same time handmade valentines did have that special meaning because the sender had taken the time and the care to make it with their own hands. I can show you actually, if you'd like to see...

JVN [00:21:08] I would love to see, yes.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:21:09] Okay, here we go. I'll show you an example of a handmade valentine. So, this is a handmade valentine. It was sent from someone in Manchester to someone in Liverpool in 1783. And in the middle you can see there's a shepherd and a shepherdess surrounded by birds standing in a woodland. It's all sort of natural imagery. It's about the sort of perfect, idealized country life. And they're standing in the middle of the sun and then growing out of that are four trees. And then there's hearts surrounded by foliage and berries in all of the corners. So you can see they're really beautiful objects, handmade valentines, that people had spent a lot of time and care perfecting.

JVN [00:21:53] I want a handmade valentine like that. That's gorgeous.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:21:56] Whereas commercial ones, they were cheaper to buy and they coexisted alongside the handmade ones throughout the 18th century.

JVN [00:22:05] And then what was the deal with, like, the comic valentines? What's that?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:22:08] Comic Valentines. I mean, they're called "comic" but they're really cruel. It's more like hate mail. So they were cruel valentines that were printed with, like, really mean caricatures on single sheets of paper. And they weren't sent by couples, but they were sent by members of the community. So people that they didn't like. And they were an example of how the older and more disruptive aspects of the celebration persisted over the centuries.

JVN [00:22:36] It was, like, if you had a neighbor you hated or, like, someone that you just really couldn't stand, you would just, like, send them a mean ass card?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:22:42] Yeah, yeah. I've got one here. This one's called "The Snake in the Grass." It's got a picture of a snake in the grass. It says, "A snake in the grass we all with horror view / and such a creeping reptile now are you / deceit and cunning to your age you bring / and even your dearest friends you oft would sting / a thing like you by none can ever be prized / as creep along both hated and despised / and those who'd know you never would repine / to see you crushed / you sneaking Valentine." They're really horrible.

JVN [00:23:10] Wow. That was, like, an Instagram takedown of 17, whatever.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:23:17] Yeah, it's a takedown. They're, they're cruel. They wouldn't have been signed. You'd have just bought it really cheaply, saying something nasty. It was all, like, "Oh, you're a snake, you're unattractive, you're never going to get married. Everybody hates you." And then you go to someone's house and put it under their door so they could see it when they wake up on Valentine's Day.

JVN [00:23:35] I wonder when people started saying, like, "Fuck you, bitch!" I think we should bring that back. Like, hate-valentines. Like, old school, like, put it on your doorstep. Like, but with the Ring cam, we would know who left it now, which would be interesting.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:23:47] Yeah yeah, yeah. Right. You could watch somebody, like, leaving you hate mail on the doorstep.

JVN [00:23:54] So what about, like, flowers, like jewelry, chocolates? Like, when do those start to become, like, readily given, like, Valentine's Day gifts?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:24:05] Men did send flowers as gifts as well as other sort of things that smelled nice. So you might send flowers or perfumed gloves, perfume bottles, baskets of fruit.

They did send jewelry as a gift. Things like necklaces or bracelets or brooches or rings. They didn't particularly send chocolate yet. They might send sweets, but those sorts of small, delicate chocolates that you might send today, that's more products of the 19th and 20th centuries. And then they would also send sort of popular consumer goods like printed textiles, furs, writing accessories, like ink wells and stands and seals, because this is before people used envelopes. You'd fold your letter up when you were finished, drip wax onto it, and then stamp it with a seal. So you could send someone a seal as a, as a gift.

JVN [00:24:58] That's cute!

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:24:59] And many of these, in the 18th century, were made specifically for lovers as a new market.

JVN [00:25:05] In your heartbreak research, have you, seen a link between, like, Valentine's Day and proposals? Like, did people start to take Valentine's Day, like, later on, like as, like, a time to be, like, "Oh, I'm going to propose marriage like around Valentine's Day" or it's not so much of a thing?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:25:19] Not really. Marriage was too important. I don't think you would propose necessarily just because it's Valentine's Day. The superstitions were that you might choose your valentine on that day, and that was a good sign that you would get married later. But it doesn't mean you would necessarily get engaged on that day or get married on that day. It was just a bit of sort of fun, really.

JVN [00:25:41] So do you think today's Valentine's Day celebrations would be recognizable to someone, like, if I was a ghost from Georgian England and I just, like, popped in for this Valentine's Day, I probably wouldn't recognize it, cause I'd be, like, [BRITISH? ACCENT] "Why are all these blokes kissing each other? And why are all these ladies doing that? And what's gender nonconformity?" Like, so I probably wouldn't get it. Or would I?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:26:02] I mean, I think the 18th century set up a lot of the practices that we have today. So they would recognize things like choosing a valentine, sending them a card. You know, they would certainly have recognized this commercial world of romance that we have now, where love is something that can be bought and sold. Valentine's Day was becoming a commercial event for the Georgians. They had state lotteries on Valentine's Day. You could buy a ticket for a Valentine lottery to maybe win lots of money. So, I mean, they weren't strangers to the world of commerce.

JVN [00:26:35] And so, like, Instagram declarations of love, they probably would be into that because they, they, like, loved a declarative moment, because they would do, like, a pretty letter and, like, be really into somebody publicly. Right? So they would probably get into Instagram.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:26:50] Yeah. I mean, they weren't *unfamiliar* with, like, people publicly declaring their love, and this was the period as well that saw the birth of the Lonely Heart ads in the newspapers.

JVN [00:27:01] What's that?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:27:02] Well, you know, you could advertise for a husband or wife by putting an advert in the newspaper, and then people would reply to it.

JVN [00:27:10] Okay, you know what's so cute? In our queer history Getting Curious episode, like, from years ago with, like, Matthew Reimer and Leighton Brown. I was saying how, like, "Oh, like I felt like I was like the first queer person from my hometown ever," and they showed me these classifieds from the sixties, from this local paper that were, like, essentially, "Gay man seeking gay man," but using, like, coded terms, like, "Seeking a new friend. I'd had a friend for a long time, but he wouldn't move out from living with his mother. And I knew it was time for me to find a new friend." So, yeah. And then what about, like, such this emphasis, because it does seem extremely commercial now, like, and maybe it's just because of the way that we access our information online and it's just always kind of around, like, but it feels like the second that we turn off Mariah's Christmas album, it's [SNAPS], like, Valentines, Valentines, Valentines. And there's this, like, pressure. Do you think that people from, like, from Georgian England would, would recognize that commercialization and, like, just all the stores with all the cards and feeling like you got to send your person something? Or do you think it's more pressure now?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:28:14] I think what we have is a much more extreme version of what they had then. It's more the commercialization has got so much more intense. But I mean, there's some really interesting cards you can look at that survive from the Victorians, so in the 19th century, when the cards they would buy were really elaborate. So, like, you could buy a card that had two birds nesting on the front and it was made with real twigs. [LAUGHS] Or you could buy a card with someone looking in a mirror on it. And it was a real mirror made of real glass. You could get ones with hair that had real hair on. So, like, they had proper sort of valentines as commercial products and you could go shopping in stores for it to select the most attractive one.

JVN [00:28:56] Ah! Oh my God, I love it, okay wait: so, like, as an expert in the history of Valentine's Day, which, like, may be one of my favorite sentences I've ever said on Getting Curious, like, what a fun expert that you get to be. And if that ain't a message for, like, chasing what brings you passion then I don't know what is. Like, I loved that you were, like, "I'm really into, like, the historical significance of Valentine's Day and I'm going to make a whole ass career out of it." [SALLY CHUCKLES] That is really fucking cool. I just have to say it's really cool. But do you celebrate the day? Like, what's been your experience of, like, did you ever find yourself being a little Bridget Jones-y and, like, being like, "Ah! I'm eating moldy cheese because that fucker cheated on me and didn't even admit it!"

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:29:37] I mean, I remember when I was at school, people used to send red roses.

JVN [00:29:43] Yeah. Oh, my God. In junior high, that's literally coming screaming back. I forgot about the fucking roses. And I would never get any. But I will say this: for Mrs. Schafer in second grade. In second grade, we made these, like, red construction paper hearts that were, like, the size of, like, both of our heads put together, like, boop, boop, like, and then you could put notes in it. And second grade, I did really good. Like, everyone was, like, leaving everybody really cute notes. Like, I had hella notes, I did not get left out like in ninth grade, but, like, those card things, like, if you're an elementary school teacher and you do, like, that whole thing on Valentine's Day for, like, I don't know where you find it. Like, maybe Google, like, Red Heart construction paper project. It was giving origami, but bigger and not as culturally interesting. Ah! But yeah, it was really cool. I just had to say.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:30:29] When I was a kid, you know, people would send red roses, girls and boys would send them in school. But, you know, ironically, now I'm an adult, you know, I wouldn't want roses as a gift anyway on Valentine's Day. Cause they're just so generic. They're so commercial. They have massive environmental costs as well, you know? They're flown in from the other side of the world for Valentine's Day.

JVN [00:30:48] Oh, because it's not—I was, like, [BRITISH ACCENT] “Actually, darling, I don't know what part of England you're from, but I've seen lots of roses there.” But I guess, of course, darling, it's the spring.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:30:56] Yeah, it's pretty cold. There's no roses blooming here right now. There's snow on the ground.

JVN [00:31:01] Well, fuck me. But what about other stuff? Do you celebrate it and—, not with flowers?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:31:06] Wouldn't say no to some nice local flowers, and I'd never say no to some chocolates.

JVN [00:31:10] Or some snowbellies! That's, like, a nice local flower for England. Like those white flowers...

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:31:15] A snowdrop?

JVN [00:31:16] Yeah, a snowdrop! Do you watch Gardeners' World with Monty Don?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:31:19] I don't watch Gardeners' World.

JVN [00:31:20] It's a really good show. It's, like, one of my top three favorite British shows. I watch it almost every night. That's how I knew about what snowdrops are. So some locally sourced flowers? Yes. Not roses. Unless you grew them during season, cut them, dried them, ground shipped it, kept it in a closet for, like, you know, seven months, and then you could give them dried flowers that are still really beautiful and maybe didn't have such an environmental impact. Ah!

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:31:49] Nice local flowers, nice chocolates. I just, you know, I have gone out for dinner on Valentine's Day before, but they, they jack the prices up so much, it costs a fortune. And you think, "Well, does that, does having that really expensive set menu with the expensive jewelry and the roses and everything, is that really the only way that we can express love now through, you know, through money?"

JVN [00:32:11] I love a bath present. Like, can you give me a bath soak or, like, like, I just love a bath. Like, can you give me some, like, great bath oil or, like, not to constantly talk about my husband, but, like, he got me a fucking, like, stick on the back of the bath pillow so that you don't have to, like, like, go like, [SHIVERING], and they get all cold when you're like, put your back on it. It's, like, now I got, like, a pillow.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:32:32] Nice!

JVN [00:32:33] Like, it's so chic. And he's, like, so thoughtful and cute, like, so I love, like, a bath moment.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:32:37] That's like the gift of leisure and me time, you know?

JVN [00:32:40] Yes!

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:32:41] Get rid of the roses and the luxury chocolates and diamond rings. I think the celebration used to be a lot more about community, about neighbors, about family rather than money. So I would perhaps bring back some customs like people used to bake Valentine buns. I'll show you a picture, hold on!

JVN [00:33:00] I fucking love buns!

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:33:02] Who doesn't love buns? I mean, come on. So this is a Valentine bun.

JVN [00:33:06] [BRITISH ACCENT] Oh! It looks a bit like a spotted dick.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:33:09] It's like an iced bun without any icing. Do you have ice buns in the States?

JVN [00:33:12] Yesterday someone had the nerve to say to me with a fucking straight face, like, "I don't like hot cross buns." And I was, like, "'Don't fucking say stuff that you don't understand because it's literally, like, a goddamn British cinnamon roll and it's gorgeous and it's so delicious." I love a hot cross bun, I'm, I'm violent about—, and do you know what my favorite British dessert is, not to go off on a tangent? Sticky toffee pudding.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:33:32] Oh, yeah.

JVN [00:33:33] That would probably be my last meal, like, that's my favorite. Like, I almost don't have words for how much I love sticky toffee pudding. Do you love it so much, too?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:33:41] I do love sticky toffee pudding. I don't know if it it would make a good gift, bit sticky.

JVN [00:33:46] I can't promise that this is my last off-subject question. But Mark is constantly telling me that if I'm going to really, like, nail my British accent, I have to pick a region and stay there. But I have this annoying habit of, like, you know, I go every, to every accent just to get through words that I may not know how to do in, like, that, you know, home region accent. But after our two times being together I've realized that if I was going to, like, case study an accent and try to fully rip one off it would be your, I love, like, what area are you from over there that's got this cute ass accent.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:34:18] Thank you! Generic southern accent.

JVN [00:34:21] I think my problem as an American is, is that everything sounds posh. Every British accent sounds just elevated, regal, sexier, like, better. But I know they're all so different. So, "Leave the pressure, embrace the fun," would be for our Valentine's Day 2023.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:34:39] Yeah! And also leave the money, you know? Make something yourself.

JVN [00:34:44] Ah, okay. Love that. So most important question here: is there anything else that we need to know before we wrap up this episode? You have been capslock patient with me today, like, not even capital P, just, like, capslock. I appreciate it. I just love talking to you so much. But is there anything Valentine's Day that we need to know that you would just be, like, remiss if you did not tell us?

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:34:05] You can read more about the history of Valentine's Day and romantic rituals more broadly in my book *The Game of Love in Georgian England*, which is out now in paperback. So it's cheaper, it's 25 quid.

JVN [00:34:17] Ah! Thank you so much for coming on Getting Curious. We love you so much. And thank you so much for your work. Sally Holloway—Dr. Sally Holloway, just thank you so

much for coming and sharing your, just, your scholarship, your work, everything that you work so hard on all the time. We can't wait for the new heartbreak book. But in the meantime, we've got your gorgeous book, which you're going to give us the title of again right now.

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:35:36] *The Game of Love in Georgian England*. And it's out now in paperback.

JVN [00:35:40] We are reading that now until your heartbreak book comes out. We love you so much. Thank you so much for coming on Getting Curious. Yay!

SALLY HOLLOWAY [00:35:45] Thank you. Thank you for having me. It's been really fun.

JVN [00:35:48] Ah! You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. Our guest this week was Sally Holloway. You'll find links to her work in the episode description of wherever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ, thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend honey and please show them how to subscribe because that is how we keep the lights on. Follow us on Instagram and Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our editor is Andrew Carson! Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim. Give it up – yasss!