



# Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 678, Interview with Christine Benson

**Jasmin Singer:** Welcome to Our Hen House, Christine.

**Christine Benson:** Thank you so much, Jasmin. I'm thrilled to be here.

**Jasmin:** Well, so am I. I'm thrilled that I'm here and I'm thrilled that you're here because I love talking about what we're going to be talking about today. And congratulations about your new book, *Marrying Myself*. It is absolutely, completely thrilling for anyone who reads to be exposed to a book where there are vegan characters. So thank you for putting it out into the world and for joining us.

My first question, if you can just tell our listeners a little bit about *Marrying Myself* and how it is connected to veganism and animal advocacy.

**Christine:** Well, *Marrying Myself* is women's fiction, so it's a very fun read. It's about a woman who's engaged to be married to the love of her life, her true soulmate, and I won't give it all away but things don't go quite according to plan.

He also happens to be incredibly wealthy, although that's not why she's marrying him. So again, things, things go somewhat awry and so it's a fun light read, but kind of with a deeper message about figuring out who we are and what matters when the whole image we had of what our life was gonna look like is suddenly out the window. And the vegan component comes in, in that the protagonist, Julia Jones, is vegan.

So little backstory, when I first started writing this book, I myself was not vegan. And then I became vegan, maybe a year into working on the book. And then I had to make my protagonist vegan because I just couldn't in good conscience implicitly endorse eating animals and animal products when I had stumbled onto a way of life that I felt like was the ethical way to live.

So, Julia changed along with me, and then it became a bit of a quandary about how many characters in the book were going to be vegan. Am I gonna pretend that I'm in this fictional vegan universe? Which isn't quite realistic. But that's where it all began.

**Jasmin:** Wow! I had no idea that you went vegan while writing it. That speaks to the power of the arts and advocacy, which I know is something we're both really passionate about. And it reminded me of, Liz Marshall went vegan, she's a filmmaker, and she went vegan while making the film, *The Ghosts in Our Machine*, which just sort of added this layer of kind of authenticity and badassery, if I can just use that word for a minute.

Well, I have so many questions for you. I love that she changed you. That is something that happens, right? Like when we're writing fiction, the characters have an impact on us. Are we like Sybil? Are we like nuts or? What do you think? How does it change you?

**Christine:** Well, I would say we are nuts, but in the best possible way.

I mean, to me, there are different universes and the worlds that we create through our art are just as real in some senses, as the worlds that we walk around in and live in.

I can't quite give Julia credit for changing me, however, I more changed her. But, you know, in hindsight, I really think that Julia herself as a character was going to go vegan at some point, whether it happened in this book or in some future fictional universe. Because she has those components, the necessary components: compassion, self-reflection, love of animals, a strong inclination toward justice. It was going to happen. It just coincidentally happened in this book while I was writing it.

**Jasmin:** That's fascinating to me. So in making your main character vegan. All right, I'm just gonna sort of play, I don't know if it's devil's advocate or if it's like a curious advocate. I don't know...but are you limiting your chances of getting a publisher?

**Christine:** Yeah, I wondered about that. I did wonder about that.

And it's funny because my publisher is actually an independent press in Texas, so you wouldn't think that they'd be particularly open to a vegan protagonist and vegan romance story, but they were. So, I did wrestle with that a little bit, and

for me it was a question of how I wanted to present this book to the world and what aspects I wanted to promote.

So certainly I wanted vegans to know about it because I know that vegans are craving representation in fiction. There just isn't a ton of vegan characterization out there in the world of fiction, particularly mainstream women's fiction, which is the genre that my book falls into. But I also didn't want to limit my audience to just vegans because you know how vegans are, we find the vegan things.

If you open a vegan restaurant or a vegan coffee shop, you don't have to worry too much about letting the vegans know about it. They're gonna be on it. So I knew that vegans would find my book and I really wanted to make it accessible and appealing to people in general, particularly women.

I didn't overly highlight the vegan aspect of the book when I was shopping it around to agents and then to publishers. I played around with it a little bit, with some people I did highlight that a little more and made a big deal about, "Oh, the world of mainstream women's fiction is ready for a vegan protagonist and here she is."

But I don't know that that was particularly effective in shopping around the book. I really just wanted to present it for what it is, which is a good story, a story that's fun and funny, but with substance that kind of leaves you with something to think about after you finish reading it.

And then the vegan component, again, depending on my audience, I highlight that more or less. But I do hope that it has an impact because like all vegans, I have that not so secret agenda of veganizing the planet.

**Jasmin:** Right. Yes. And we love you for that secret agenda. And we share it too.

I actually wrote my first fiction piece in a long time, I wrote a YA book, which I'm currently working on edits for it with my agent. My two books that came out are both non-fiction, so it's a big leap and it's kind of exactly for the reasons you just said, which are like, "Well, let's get an audience who is just very interested in a particular genre."

In my case it's YA, in your case, it's romance, but also just like women's fiction, as you said. And you kind of sneak it in cuz people look at any art in a sort of more open-minded way I think. So I have two questions for you. One, why romance? And two, I'd love your thoughts on what I just said about how the arts

seems to make people a bit more open-hearted to take in messages such as veganism.

**Christine:** I never thought of myself, and I still don't think of myself as a romance writer.

The way this novel came about was that I was living in Boston at the time, which is where the book is set. And I had a friend, who I was pretty close to at the time, who was very artsy, kind of flaky. She'd done a lot of theater and acting and she came to me pretty out of the blue one day and said, "I know you like to write and I wanna do some more writing. And I've done all this research and the only genre of books that are increasing in profitability are romance and women's fiction. You know, chicklit." So she said, "Why don't we write a book together, like a romance novel?"

And at the time I thought, "Well, that's not really what I'm particularly interested in writing, but sure. It's an opportunity. I'm gonna take it. It's a chance to nudge myself into doing more writing." So the two of us got together and just came up with a basic plot component, which is essentially that a woman's engaged to marry this dream soulmate who's incredibly wealthy, but things don't quite work out.

So that was about as much as we planned out together. And then we went our separate ways and the plan was that we would each write a few chapters every week and trade chapters and continue that way until the novel was done. And like I said, this girl is wonderful, but she was always pretty flaky.

So I went off and did my first chapter, wrote the first chapter of the book, and had a lot of fun with it and sent it off to her. And then I literally never heard from her again. It wasn't an intentional ghosting or anything, I think she just got busy and caught up in other things.

I stewed about it for a week or two and then I thought, "Screw her. I'll just finish writing the book myself. I'll bang it out in six months, you know, it's a romance book. I'll just write it really fast and crank it out."

So now, 10 plus years later, here we are. But that was the backstory.

**Jasmin:** Yeah. That's super interesting. So what about...gosh, I have too many questions for you.

What about the arts? Like, tell me about your feeling regarding the sort of openness that creates for people. Unless am I...do you agree with me? I'm assuming you agree.

**Christine:** I do. I do. I totally agree with you and I think that's especially true of humor. I'm also a huge fan of satire and I've written a lot of *Onion* style spoof news stories. And so I really feel like humor especially opens people up to thinking about things in a different way and seeing a new perspective. And the arts in general, I think, are so powerful because they really need to stand on their own. You know, this novel I don't think would have worked if I had set out with my vegan agenda going into it. I didn't start out saying, "I am going to write a novel that normalizes veganism."

I set out thinking, "I'm gonna write a novel that says something and speaks to people and it's gonna be what it is, and my protagonist is vegan. And that will have the ripple effect that it has." But I don't think we can control our art in a really agenda oriented way.

Or if we do, it won't come off feeling authentic. And like I said, Julia herself is a character and she's her own being. And so she was going to be vegan. She simply was, whether it happened with me or in the imaginary universe where she lives, she just was going to get there. So the way I see writing, I don't know if this was how it worked with you and your YA novel, but I really believe strongly in the power of characters.

And once I come up with my characters, I just kind of let them do their thing. You know, they run loose and sometimes it surprises me what happens in the book. So the vegan aspect was a little bit of a surprise. There were many scenes in the novel that came as a surprise to me. I did not expect certain turns of events in the book. But again, they were just my characters doing their thing.

So yeah. I think the arts are incredible, but again, we can't control them. We can't manipulate them into saying what we want them to say, if that makes sense.

**Jasmin:** It makes complete sense. I feel so validated because when I was writing the YA book, I would write early in the morning. Every morning I'd be saying goodbye to my wife. I'd be like, "All right, I'm going into Narnia now." Like, it's just this whole world of people who have this life that I'm fascinated by and it is a very humbling experience to be able to sort of be the vessel for their stories unfolding. And put on top of that our secret...I almost said our

secret gay agenda... Well, there's that too, but put on top of that, the secret vegan agenda and it's really very powerful for me.

It was almost a spiritual experience. Did you have that?

**Christine:** Yes, definitely a spiritual experience in the sense that, you know, it sounds so convoluted, but you really do feel like a vessel when you're just writing and things happen that you didn't predict or didn't plan out. It definitely was a spiritual experience.

What you were saying about these characters that you loved and you just felt so honored to be privy to their private lives and inner thoughts and emotions. I definitely felt that way. And for me, it was my love of my characters that gave me the fortitude and determination to get this book out into the world.

Because as I'm sure you're aware, publishing is not for the faint of heart. So shopping it around to agents, finding a literary agent, which is a challenge for any first time author, and then shopping it around to publishers. It was my devotion to my characters and my desire to get them heard and get them seen and be out in the world that really fueled my persistence.

**Jasmin:** Amazing. Yeah. Like, cuz it's about the animals, not about us.

And I feel so lucky to have that as a driving force and I can tell you do too. I'm gonna get back to the publishing side of things in just a second, but I have one more question about the book itself.

Well, maybe more than one, but this one for sure. You found a number of ways to incorporate information about animal agriculture into the book. I found that one of the most successful was when another character, a not very nice one, made fun of the protagonist for her veganism. So tell us a bit about your ideas for achieving a balance with this.

Like how much info? What kind of info? And what kind of messaging?

**Christine:** It was a fine line to walk, and some of it was premeditated and some was not. One thing that I did was early on in my process, one of the earlier drafts of the book, I had four people close to me read the novel and give me feedback, and two of those people were vegans and two were not vegans.

So I really wanted to test out whether the book would appeal to only vegans or whether it would have appeal to everybody who just appreciated the story. So that was kind of a good testing ground.

It's tricky because, ideally everyone... I mean, I believe that everyone should be vegan. It's not some grandiose aspiration, it's a pretty fundamental moral baseline. So it would be hard for me to create characters that I like and respect, who don't consider what's happening to non-human animals on the planet. And at the same time, realistically, we live in a world where very few people do. So it was a question of who to make vegan, how to make it realistic and also how to make it sympathetic and also accessible to people.

It's tricky. I don't know that I always struck the right balance, but I do feel like I got in several different perspectives. You know, the character that you mentioned, who's the nemesis, he does a great job of poking at Julia's veganism. Julia's my main character and you know, the references to her eating disorder, "Oh, I mean, your veganism." And you know, it's just making it seem like it's her issue, it's her psychological issue. And then the more lackadaisical people who don't think highly of veganism but don't know too much about it, like one of the characters in the book is an interior designer who just tends to assume that all vegan food is disgusting, and he's just pleasantly surprised when it's not and he tries it.

So I tried to present a range of perspectives about veganism.

**Jasmin:** And I think you succeeded. It's making me think of John Yunker's writing. John Yunker has frequently been featured on Our Hen House, and one thing that people might know him for is that he wrote the radio play *Sanctuary* that we put on every year around Thanksgiving.

And there's also that character in *Sanctuary* that is sort of poking fun at the vegan. And I think an important part of a book that has to do with veganism because they're kind of speaking for the naysayers and we, as the vegans and as the authors, have the opportunity to correct them.

All right. Let's get back to what you mentioned a few minutes ago. What are some of the challenges that a new writer faces in getting a book deal?

**Christine:** Well, so many. I think one of the biggest challenges is just that so many people are writing and there's just such a glut of content that it's hard to get traction if nobody knows who you are.



The finding a literary agent is the first hurdle. Well, it's deciding, first of all, obviously self-publishing is an option, so the first decision that needs to be made is whether someone wants to be traditionally published. In other words, go through a literary agent and then find a traditional publisher, or go the self-publishing route, which is becoming more and more desirable an option these days.

I considered those two options and decided that I preferred the traditional publishing route just because I'm more of a writer and an artist than a marketer and promotional sort of personality and self-publishing is really all about self-promotion and entrepreneurship, which I appreciate a lot and brings a lot to the table.

So my first challenge was finding a literary agent, and that was just a question of sheer persistence and viewing it as a numbers game. I just researched agents who represented the sort of fiction that I was writing and kept an Excel spreadsheet, keeping track of all my submissions to various people. Asking anybody and everybody I knew if they knew any literary agents.

Doing all the tricks that you hear about, reading the acknowledgements in books in your genre to see who they named as their agent, if they thank them in the acknowledgements. And then after finding an agent, then it was a question of the agent shopping around and finding a publishing deal that was gonna work.

So two steps to the process. And it was the first hurdle of finding a literary agent that really is the biggest hurdle, I think, for a new time author. So I was very grateful when I found my agent who's in New York City, and she's been great.

**Jasmin:** That is so good. It's so important to be connected with the right one.

I recently switched agents, so this is my third. I know. I think third time's a charm. I've definitely jived with this one the best and I think that there's an important factor at play. And you wanna be teamed with someone who not only believes in your project, but in the longevity of your career.

And that is definitely what the new one that I have is doing for me. And it's like a relationship. You know, I could talk on and on about this. I also agree that people have self-publishing as a route and I didn't go that route myself either. And so when people ask me about it, I'm not always sure what to say, but I think you're right that it is a lot about marketing.



However, as someone who was with the Big Five, I had to market the hell out of both of my books.

**Christine:** Yes. Yes.

**Jasmin:** It's like their publishers are good for nothing really when it comes to that, what do you think?

**Christine:** Totally agree. Totally agree. And I'm not with a Big Five publisher, and so I was very cognizant of that going into this whole process.

I decided that I would need to view this process as if I were self-publishing because the publisher essentially creates a product that is gonna be on the shelves, and whether I sell one of those products or a million of those products is really up to me. The publisher just doesn't have the bandwidth or the drive to let people know about this book in the way that I will.

So yeah, totally with you there.

**Jasmin:** Which is why, for people who are listening to this for advice, which is why writing ability is not necessarily the main thing. In fact, it's not the main thing that people are looking for.

Publishers, especially the bigger ones are looking for people who have a platform. Agents frequently are too, not every agent, but that is why some people go the self-publishing route because they just want their book out there. And, I think it's a very...there's so many more interesting opportunities for writers now.

What is a hybrid publisher? I think a lot of people aren't familiar with that.

**Christine:** Yeah, I don't know a ton about hybrid publishing. I did connect with a couple of places, so I think essentially what they do is they provide some services that traditional publishers would provide, like namely editing and copy editing. They charge a fee for that, and then you're responsible for publishing the book and getting it out into the world.

So I don't know a ton about that either. I was very leery of hybrid publishing, but I don't know a lot about it.

**Jasmin:** I think there's also maybe situations where, you know, you don't get an advance, but you split the shares, you split any income that you receive with the publisher.

So, but yeah, there's just so many things to explore here. I guess I'll give a shout out to my friend Rachel Krantz's podcast, *Help Existing*. She interviewed someone in the publishing industry a few months back, and we'll link to it in the show notes for people who are interested because that person got very in the details with this kind of thing, and it was fascinating to me.

So just going back to advice for writers, especially thinking about the Our Hen House audience specifically, how much would you say, and I know you're not gonna, this is not a a trick question, but how much is the right amount to introduce veganism into your books?

**Christine:** Yeah, it's a good question. I mean, I don't think there's any one right answer, and I think it all serves a real purpose.

You know, even just a casual mention of veganism goes a long way to normalize veganism as a lifestyle, and then more in depth information obviously can have a deeper impact on people. So it really just depends. I mean, the best advice I would give to people is just to be true to themselves and to their art, because the thing that turns people off the most is anything that seems contrived or just less than fully authentic.

So, veganism is great. I mean, for me, the more of an impact we can have through the arts, the better, but it's kind of a catch 22 because you can't force it.

**Jasmin:** That's great advice. So as a writer and as an author, I know this recently came out, but what are you working on now?

**Christine:** I just started a new novel set in Charleston, South Carolina. That's about a podcast host, about crypto. So that's gonna be another women's fiction book. And then I already have my eye on the novel following that, which is not gonna be women's fiction, which that one's about a male lawyer who believes he has a defective soul.

So he uses it in kind of a products liability sense. You know, from a legal perspective, who do you sue if you get a defective soul.

**Jasmin:** That's fascinating.

**Christine:** That one's definitely on the agenda, but first I wanna write one more women's fiction book about this couple that lives in Charleston.

**Jasmin:** That is so cool. Why Charleston?

**Christine:** It's a great city and my sister lives there. So I view this as a great excuse to go visit and get to know it more deeply, and it's just an amazing city. I don't know if you've been there, but it's beautiful and so historical. Also, like the satirical side of me, just enjoys the prospect of poking fun at some of the Old South traditions and that sort of thing.

**Jasmin:** Yeah. That's awesome. I was there very briefly and I agree that I liked it a lot and I need to go back, especially now that you're talking about it. So you mentioned that there's a podcast host involved, which I definitely wanna read this, clearly, but you also have a new podcast. Tell us about it.

**Christine:** I do, it's called the Vegan Posse.

And essentially I started it just because in my vegan travels and adventures, I've just met so many interesting, quirky, amazing people around the world, and I just didn't want those conversations to go to waste. And then also as a vegan, I'm sure you've experienced this phenomenon, but it's just really like we're living in a parallel universe, just aware of this whole world of suffering that most people don't even acknowledge. So to me, I really wanted to just incorporate this idea of, you know, we're not alone. We have a whole posse of individuals around the world who aren't just keeping the peace but creating it through their food choices and beyond. And so just the whole concept that we're not alone. Like we may feel alone. We may feel like outliers and outsiders, living this vegan life may feel like we're swimming upstream and in many senses we are. But at the same time, just boosting that awareness that there are lots of people around the world thinking about these things.

Living lives of integrity and compassion, and just doing really interesting things.

**Jasmin:** I love that you're just sort of reminding our listeners and reminding vegans and animal activists and people who care about social justice in general, that we definitely feel alone, but we definitely are not alone. And you know, people who listen to Our Hen House know that I send videos to donors and Vicki makes the list for me every week, and it's just amazing. We're all over the world and I kind of wish everyone could see all of the videos or at least the list because we're everywhere and we're all fighting for the same thing. And when

you read a book like yours, then you are reminded of that, because your characters are going to resonate with our listeners just to make that exact point, we're not alone. There are a lot of other people including in fiction now, thank you very much, that are just like us. So that is super cool.

Am I right that you have a support group?

**Christine:** I do. I host a community group here in Nashville. Well, we've gone virtual, so now it's not limited to Nashville and it's called Vegan Peace. Two support groups, in fact, one is called Vegan Peace, and that is a support group for vegans and those troubled by animal exploitation. And then I also host a separate support group called Vegan 101: Must have info for those making the Vegan Leap, and that's a more practical hands-on nutrition diet support group.

**Jasmin:** Hmm. Amazing. Well, we'll definitely link to that, if it's okay with you, in the show notes, for people who are interested and also to your book, *Marrying Myself*, which people can get. And I will say, please leave a review once you read it. It's very important for writers to have reviews, and also you're helping veganism because you're getting it in front of more people's eyes by having positive reviews.

So, Chrissie, I can't thank you enough for joining us on Our Hen House today. Can you please tell our listeners where they can follow you online and any other contact info you'd like to share?

**Christine:** I don't have a huge online presence, but my website is [christinemelaniebenson.com](http://christinemelaniebenson.com) and my book can be found on all the usual sites, Amazon, Barnes and Noble, and local bookstore Parnassus Books in Nashville.

**Jasmin:** Amazing. Thank you so much, Chrissie.

**Christine:** Thank you, Jasmin.