

Josey Vogels is the author of the nationally syndicated relationships column *My Messy Bedroom* and the dating advice column *Dating Girl*. She has published five books on sex and relationships – the most recent is entitled *Bedside Manners: Sex Etiquette Made Easy*. Her fourth book, *The Secret Language of Girls* has been published in several languages and was made into a documentary. She also hosted 26 episodes of the Gemini-nominated television series, “My Messy Bedroom” on the Women's Television Network. We spoke to her by phone from her home Toronto, Ontario on November 2 and had a candid discussion about cleaning up the mess in and out of the bedroom. Naturally we started by telling her a little more about us – notably the theme of the poems and stories in this issue – and then we asked her what she thought it all meant...

Room: *Perhaps not surprisingly, stories in this issue explore aspects of both emotional and physical intimacy. How would you, or your readers, define these two terms?*

JV: The contrast of these two experiences brings to mind the debate between erotica and porn. Is one inherently valuable and the other, by definition, disposable? I think emotional and physical intimacy are both essential, overlap, and can coexist in our lives. They are really two points along the same spectrum, sometimes parallel, and we must, as women, decide where we are most comfortable.

Finding that perfect blend of physical and emotional intimacy is perhaps the life work of a relationship and has to be unique to our own experience and to our partnership. I would say, though, that we spend much more time, as women, discussing our emotional needs than our physical ones, and when we do do the latter, it's largely more talk than action.

Room: *Many of the female characters here are lonely both within their relationships and while trying to enter one - they lack emotional intimacy - and are struggling to balance the need to connect with the need to reserve some 'room of their own'. In your experience are women still reluctant to reserve time and interests for themselves within a couple, or while dating, for fear of being selfish?*

JV: I'm often disappointed that having come through the whole feminist movement, women still put others first in parenting and partnering. If they do put themselves first, they feel

guilty and apologize for their behaviour. When we do act “selfishly,” we’re seen as strident or grating, whereas men just take what they need and expect it.

Privately, we blame men for taking this from us, but I wonder if this isn’t really masking the fact that we haven’t dealt with our own fear of our own power. Do we associate this kind of selfishness with the effect of being alone, or lonely, and that frightens us?

It astounds me that we’re so traditional in this day and age; women really do still focus on their domestic space in a way that I find unhealthy. One need only turn on the TV and witness the proliferation of home improvement shows targeting a female demographic. Is this the only way, and place, we are meant to seize control?

Room: *It’s a truism that all relationships require some compromise. Have you identified, in conversations with the men and women who contact you, any commonalities in terms of assessing the price of a compromise?*

JV: I’m uncomfortable with the word “compromise.” It seems to imply a giving in or a giving up. I think relationships that work are really more about acceptance of the other and picking your battles. This doesn’t mean that we should tolerate abuse or that we should accept unforgivable behaviour at our expense.

The real question is, “Why is it important for me to ‘win’? or be ‘right’?” Will this in itself make me happy, or is it better to really examine why I’m upset, what I can alter, or adjust, or claim responsibility for, and then have a non-threatening, open conversation with my partner to negotiate the middle ground?

Room: *What’s the step between knowing a relationship must change and saying it out loud?*

JV: It’s so easy for those on the outside to see our relationship, size it up, and give advice, but when you’re living it, it’s not so easy to have the confidence we need to leave. We doubt ourselves, ask, “What if I’m making a huge mistake?” Getting to that moment is an individual process toward self-awareness.

We have to get to a place where we know that we deserve to be happy, and if we're not, we have to be brave enough to confront our partner and be honest about how we're feeling and what we think is wrong with the current situation. Most of us know it in our minds and bodies long before we say the words, but it's a matter of that feeling accruing, solidifying, and then reaching a critical mass or tipping point that says, "I'm worth the risk because this is more bad than good."

Room: *Are women better at asking for what they want now, in and out of the bedroom? Is this culturally determined?*

JV: I wish I could say that we are better at asking for what we want, but in actual fact I think we just talk the talk. We're good at posturing publicly, but privately we're still meek. I think women still find the fear of rejection too terrifying and rather than face that disappointment we silence ourselves.

It's deeply ingrained in us that we are not to ask, but rather to *please*. And I think this *is* culturally determined to a certain extent. I think of Latin cultures in which women are more sexually aggressive, but there's a real machismo at play as well. In Canada, the stereotype of the polite applies to women in this respect as well, but of course there are always exceptions worth celebrating.

So much of how women act is presented to us via the two-dimensional media – "Sex and the City," books, films, etcetera - they all scream female empowerment, but do we live this way? Five years ago we were making progress on these fronts, but today there's a repressive movement afoot and we've lost the piss-and-vinegar and settled instead for a nonchalance or acceptance that skirts the whole issue of female sexuality. I think we lack the conviction of our forerunners in this regard; we pay lip service to it, but we don't live it.

Room: *Is it still a dirty little secret that society expects women to marry and mother or is it largely sanctioned now to have a series of open or monogamous relationships that never end in a lifetime commitment or children?*

JV: Why do women have to explain why they're single? Do married women explain why they're married? I married at 40 and most were shocked. I can't tell you how many people congratulated me though, and for what? Many didn't even know us as a couple. It's not an *achievement* per se.

Look at the industry of wedding planning and you'll be instantly overwhelmed by innumerable magazines, shows, websites, all poised like a well-oiled machine to suck you into this spectator sport. So much of this is generic and impersonal, cookie-cutter weddings for the everyman groom and everywoman bride. I couldn't stand it.

I know so many single girlfriends in urban centres where it's much easier to live the single lifestyle, but outside these hubs it's much harder. Finding love is a wonderful thing, but if it hasn't happened, it isn't a failure – that notion is absolutely wrong. Women are more often financially independent in their 20s, 30s, 40s and don't need to rely on men for this support, but socially we haven't caught up with this reality so the 50s' notion of “snagging a man” still seems to infuse the conversation, sub-textually at least.

Room: *In your opinion, have women come to accept that one person/partner cannot, should not, be their single source of happiness? Was this ever fair to the partner, or even possible? Is this a relief or disorienting?*

JV: We're told that our partners should be our best friends, but I'm not sure that's wise. I have many best friends and their roles won't be usurped by my husband, especially if I've known them for years and our relationship is relatively new by comparison.

This returns to the notion of building your own space. You don't have to fuse when you marry. This “Jerry Maguire” idea that “you complete me” is so false and did women such a disservice. It's our responsibility to complete ourselves and no man will ever be able to do that for us.

When you think of your female friendships, you allow for their unique personalities and moods and you give them room to be separate. You don't have to be on the same page every minute. Yet this is what some women expect of their partners, lest they begin to doubt

the relationship and their partner's love. You can't ask them to be mind readers or to intuit your every feeling and need in advance.

You are two people choosing to spend a lot of time together, but you're not an undifferentiated unit. If you were, you would have, in effect, fallen in love with yourself and most of us are attracted to someone precisely because they are NOT us, complementary but not identical. It would be narcissistic in the extreme to expect our partners to become us, so step back and let them be the person you fell in love with.

Room: *Has there been a revolution for men equivalent to the feminist revolution? Do we need one?*

JV: I do think there needs to be a male revolution, but I don't think it's going to happen. I often feel men are cheated today because the traditional role doesn't fit most of them or do them any favours. Either they are unable to live up to more modern expectations or they are stereotyped as holdovers of the past. Many admit that they're tired of these two limited choices and uncertain about their identity.

Just as feminist didn't mean unfeminine or men-hating, being masculine doesn't have to imply this limited role. Men can be both masculine and vulnerable. That said, power is still what is most valued in today's society and what men strive for; vulnerability is not something to covet. A revolution in the name of vulnerability is not likely, to say the least, despite the fact that being vulnerable can be powerful.

I don't know how a revolution of this order will come about when it's practically a national pastime to joke about the differences between men and women and therefore ingrain them. That said, I do know men who challenge the stereotype, but are there enough of them to do this on a mass scale? It's only been a half century for women and we had a revolution and still have so much to do to fight the momentum of centuries of traditional roles. In the grand scope of things, it's early days for us and, therefore, for men too. It won't happen overnight and certainly not if both genders are passive.

Room: *What is the single most often-cited complaint women have about their love lives? What do you advise?*

JV: From women I hear, “Men don’t understand us? What’s wrong with them? Why can’t they commit? Why isn’t he the man I want him to be?” It’s not new and it’s not even interesting any more to ask these questions; they’re just too easy. Women let themselves succumb to gender stereotypes and too quickly blame the men for their lack of feelings, their inability to interpret what they need, to settle down, but is this reasonable?

Sure, men could improve in these areas, but this is outside our control. What can women do to avoid the same pitfalls? I say decide what you want and what you need and don’t settle until you find it, or at least most of it most of the time.

Both men and women in relationships write to me complaining about how much work marriage and commitment are, while the single set write about how hard it is to find a good man/woman. In either case, our partners, whether the same sex or the opposite, will communicate differently than we do. Biologically, culturally, socially, they are unique and there’s no magic formula or miracle cure, just hard work.

What I hear from women in terms of what’s happening between the sheets is, “He doesn’t know how to touch me. There’s no foreplay.” I tell them to stop sulking and start talking. Women have to ask for what they want and take more responsibility for the conversation. Silence just perpetuates the behaviour. Don’t be lazy. Your partner will respond if he/she can, but if you don’t tell them, or show them, you can’t blame them.

Room: *Turning to pop culture for a moment, in terms of the evolution of the modern dating scene – from online and speed dating, to lunch meetings for corporate singles, to cuddle parties – what works for most of the men and women you talk to?*

JV: All of these are reasonable for someone, but not for everyone, and in many ways looking for a mate is like looking for a job – you have to play the numbers and network. I advise a casual attitude; don’t take it too seriously and you’ll fare a lot better emotionally. It’s

like buying a lottery ticket, maybe you'll win, maybe not, but if you don't play you'll never win.

It's a volume game, the more opportunities you have to meet people, the better the odds that you'll meet someone you genuinely like in the long term. You can't expect to connect with everyone, and if you do you'll find the Internet dating scene depressing, disappointing and pathetic. Don't think of it as a chance to meet "the one," but rather auditions, a chemistry test, just plain entertainment with the possible side effect of some really good friends or a partner.

Certainly be smart about your choices and don't allow anyone to prey on you. If it feels wrong, don't do it. For the unscrupulous, single people are easy targets – they're vulnerable and looking for love and someone will try to make money off that.

I still favour personal introductions from friends or workmates and you have to admit that a lot comes down to chemistry and that connection that can't be faked, duplicated, packaged, or bottled.

Room: *Have we seen the apogee of romance reality TV or is there a new frontier, perhaps even more bizarre, to come?*

JV: Nothing screws up our notions of intimacy more than romance reality TV. It's so far from reality and from healthy I don't even know where to start. Most of us are smart enough to realize this and we watch for a laugh, or for sick fascination, or a guilty pleasure, but for some they really do buy into the performance, the parade of women in evening gowns and bathing suits, with roses in their hands and hope in their eyes.

Take the first date scene as an example. How many people talk about their plans for children, their life's journey, and their family history on the first date? They go from 0 to 60 as quickly as possible because it's staged for drama and to incite the train wreck, crying spree, cat fight or competition. It's ridiculous, but it draws the viewers and it's low cost so I fear it's here to stay.

Conversation is a lost art. If someone can be interesting, courteous, compassionate, conscientious and is just trying to get to know another person rather than trying to score a date or an invitation, then you feel that you're connecting as humans and not as prospects. Getting someone to choose us is false validation; we're so much more complex than that. Are you choosing each other? And for what?

Room: *Can you comment on the self-help book boom from He's Just Not That Into You to Eat, Pray, Love and more serious treatments of the gender divide and life/love balance? Any favourites you'd recommend?*

All these books come hurling to my door for review so I've seen a lot of them. For the most part I like books that urge self-awareness, wholeness, the ability to be happy in a relationship or out, taking responsibility for our own feelings. I liked the premise of *He's Just Not That Into You*, in that it said women deserve more than they settle for and should stop selling themselves short, but the way it was packaged, oversold and spoon-fed turned it into something else. I haven't read *Eat, Pray, Love*, but hear it's excellent and plan to pick it up.

Recently I reviewed *Mating in Captivity: Reconciling the Erotic and the Domestic* by Esther Perel, which offered a fresh take and looked at female desire as self-exploration rather than from the point of view of the other. It looks at the role feminism played in this and how the North American notion of the sexual has profoundly messed us up. I found it really hopeful.

I also read an anthology called *The Other Woman: Twenty-one Wives, Lovers, and Others Talk Openly About Sex, Deception, Love, and Betrayal* edited by Victoria Zackheim, which discusses loyalty, faithfulness, monogamy, infidelity, and more and was a very refreshing and honest look at the woman scorned and the seductress and every combination in between.

Finally, I'd recommend *Concertina An Erotic Memoir of Extravagant Tastes and Extreme Desires* by Susan Winemaker, a dominatrix in London. Great fun and very educational, honest, and humanizing.

Room: *If you had one thing you'd like to ask our readers to consider, what would it be?*

JV: I'd want women to ask themselves if they are really being honest with themselves in terms of their frustrations, culpability, responsibility and role. So often we point fingers first and never stop to ask ourselves these questions. Are the things that bother us really important or are we sweating the small stuff, the trivial at the expense of what's really important to us. What is that? Fight for that.

I've learned to wait it out, hold my tongue for a few hours or a few days to see what's really going on with me before I bring it up with my partner. Where are these feelings coming from? Once you know, be bold and have that conversation, whether it's about the relationship or about sex. If you're cryptic and indirect, you'll get nowhere so practice asking for what you want in bed and out of it. Typically, if you can do it in one of these places, you can do it in the other. Get comfortable with that and then practice, practice, practice.