

Jamie Broadnax: Welcome to Get It Right, a new podcast series from Rewire. I am your host, Jamie Broadnax, the founder and creator of Black Girl Nerds. Get It Right analyzes pop culture through the lens of justice. From examining the way abortion providers have been portrayed on television, to discussing body positivity in comics, to exploring the history of reproductive justice in hip-hop. Get It Right will dissect maddening tropes, celebrate the art and artists who get it right, and present our favorite movies, music, comics and television in a whole new light. Today, we're going to take a look at everybody's problematic fave. That's right. We're talking Game of Thrones and how one of the most popular and ambitious shows in history handles race, gender, sex, and sexual assault. As much as many of us love this show, come on now, let's be honest. It's got a few shortcomings.

Joining me to discuss all of this and more is Joanna Robinson. Joanna is a senior writer for VanityFair.com and one of the hosts of the popular Game of Thrones podcast: Storm of Spoilers. A couple of important notes, though, before we get started. First of all, we discuss a lot of Game of Thrones spoilers up through the most recent season, so if you have not seen those shows, please pause the podcast, go watch them, and come back and listen. Second, we speak frankly about difficult topics like sexual assault, so please be warned if any of that may be triggering. Now, let's get with Joanna about Game of Thrones and what it does and what it doesn't get right. Thanks for coming on the show, Joanna.

Joanna Robinson: Thanks so much for having me.

Jamie Broadnax: Let's dive right into this, shall we?

Joanna Robinson: I'm ready, I'm ready.

Jamie Broadnax: First of all, I have to ask you, which house do you rep?

Joanna Robinson: House Mormont, I think, is my house, for sure.

Jamie Broadnax: You know what, Lady Mormont is so boss now. A lot of people are switching to House Mormont just because of her.

Joanna Robinson: I was always the loyal Jorah Mormont fan, but now that Lyanna Mormont is in the pack, it's like House Mormont, the best. What about you? What's your house?

Jamie Broadnax: It's House Stark. It's been House Stark since the beginning. I'm just very loyal to them. This family's gone through so much and I'm such a huge stan for Jon Snow.

Joanna Robinson: It's hard to argue. You can't argue with someone being House Stark, for sure.

Jamie Broadnax: Let's talk a little bit about the way the show has been critiqued and this new term that I actually was not familiar with this term until it came on my radar called "sexposition", which is the portmanteau term for sex and exposition. It was coined by a critic that was actually watching Game of Thrones. Basically what sexposition

is is whenever there's a scene involving exposition, any sort of sexual intercourse that's happening either in the background or the foreground is sort of like fodder for the scene. Maybe the most famous example of sexposition is Petyr Baelish plotting and dumping back story in his brothel in season one. My question to you, Joanna, is why you think sexposition is so prevalent? Do you think it moves the story forward? Does it diminish the story or the characters? What are your thoughts on that?

Joanna Robinson: I honestly think it's something that they did a lot more at the beginning and they do much less now. The Baelish scene you're talking about is season one. There's also a scene with Daenerys's now dead brother Viserys where he's with one of her handmaidens in a bathtub and he's talking about the history of dragons. I think the presumption, especially in the first season, was that viewers trying to download all the complex information about this universe would be bored if they didn't have some hot ladies to look at. I think they were presuming that they were pitching this story towards a straight male audience. However, over time, I think that significantly decreased and in season four, I would say it is, you had Oberyn Martell doing it with a naked dude with the brothel-runner Oliver. I think it's a cheap device that they leaned on early on and now, trust me, I am always looking for a naked lady being there for no reason so I can be like, "Why is that naked lady there?"

I definitely remember, not last season, season six, but season five, like Ramsay and Miranda, his girlfriend, she was super naked pretty much for no reason. They weren't even having sex at the time. I'm always looking for it, but last season, it was pretty clean of that sort of thing. You definitely had nudity for sure, but in terms of that sexposition device, which I'm guessing you agree with me that it's a totally cheap move, I think they've got other problems, but that's one they've moved away from, I think.

Jamie Broadnax: I mean, it's always seen through the male gaze, right? You are always seeing women in these scenes and you mentioned Oberyn Martell. That's the one time I've really seen males being used in sexposition.

Joanna Robinson: I there was another one in season one where Renly and Loras were like ...

Jamie Broadnax: Yes, yes.

Joanna Robinson: Like shaving the chest and then there was a blow job. I think their having Daario for a while was like the token naked butt for dudes. Like Daenerys would be talking ...

Jamie Broadnax: I remember the Daario butt scene, yes. I remember that very well.

Joanna Robinson: Yes. She would be clothed or she would have a sheet on her and his butt would just be out and they're like, "See? We can do butts, too. It's fine." There is a difference between a fully naked woman and some guy's butt. There is a difference there. I've gotten into the weirdest debates online about what qualifies as nudity equality because a bare chest on a man is not the same on a bare chest on a woman. Do I

have to demand a penis? I feel a little weird about demanding a penis, but Emilia Clarke I think has said that she would like to see more penises on the show given how often the women are stripped entirely down.

Jamie Broadnax: It's clear that we know who's sort of running the scenes behind the scenes with the camera and the producers. It's a lot of men because you don't see that happening where there's women behind the scenes. It's very interesting to see that disparity there between the male and female nudity on the show.

Joanna Robinson: Yeah. Game of Thrones is a symptom of a larger problem in TV where you have very few female directors, very few female show runners, and very few female writers. It's getting better. There's been a lot of awareness over it in the past couple years, so it's definitely getting better, but Game of Thrones hasn't had a female director since Michelle MacLaren I want to say in season three, maybe season four. They're not going to have any female directors next year. They haven't for the past two years. They have no female writers in their writer room and their main producers, like their line producers, are all men. There's a woman who runs production for the team. It's just a lot of male energy driving Game of Thrones, for sure. Absolutely.

Jamie Broadnax: What are the silliest or the most offensive examples that you've seen on Game of Thrones?

Joanna Robinson: I think the clear winner is that Little Finger scene. It is like, if you go back and watch it now, you might feel embarrassed that that's what the show is doing. I feel embarrassed for the show and even worse is like in that scene is this character Roz, who was invented for the show, this prostitute. She's not in the books and she's invented in the show and she had to carry a lot of the sexposition burden. I think she and Tyrion have a sexposition scene in the pilot. She was just this naked proxy. Eventually, they killed her off very brutally. Initially, even with Pycelle, too. Roz would just be there and be naked so you could take in this information. It's pretty insulting.

Jamie Broadnax: I remember reading in the books, there were two black female characters, Chataya and Alayaya, who were from the Summer Isles that lived in a brothel and there was interaction and a relationship with Tyrion. As it turns out, Roz is sort of an amalgam of those two characters. I'm curious to know, why do you think that the creators went in a different direction by not really showing the black female characters in the book and just sort of seeming women of color, in general, in the world of Westeros.

Joanna Robinson: Yeah, I know. That is a great question. I love the Chataya character in the books. I think she's so great. The making Roz white and basically from Winterfell is a decision they've made and they've tried to make decisions going forward, like Areo Hotah, who is this guardsman in the Dorne plot, he's white in the books and they cast a black actor in that. Then that character turned out to be a complete waste of space, so I'm not going to give them too many marks for that. Salladhor Saan, I

can't remember if that character is black in the books.

Jamie Broadnax: He's white in the books.

Joanna Robinson: Yeah, he's white in the books, so they made him black in the show. There are a few instances where they've done the reverse. They've taken a white character and make him black. George RR Martin certainly didn't give them a lot of opportunities. Chataya is a good example, but he didn't give them a lot of opportunities to cast non-white actors and I think that they have been trying, once again, to get better at that. Opportunities with the Dothraki and a few other things, but it's still egregiously out of balance in this show. This is another example where I will say something like that ... I don't know if you intended this to be Joanna Therapy Hour, like Joanna talks about all the times that the fandom has yelled at her. Whenever I talk about racial representation, I get back people saying like, "This is supposed to be Europe in the Middle Ages." I'm like, "No. There are dragons. If there are dragons, there can be anything. I'm not here for that argument."

I know that one thing I think they've really tried to bulk up the Missandei and Grey Worm characters who are much ... Missandei's a child and Grey Worm is pretty low down the ranks, so they tried to flesh out those characters to give you two non-white characters who at least have more screen time. I don't think those characters are as interesting as they might be, but I'm all for them trying to expand. Give us a more diverse palate when we're watching the show.

Jamie Broadnax: Absolutely. So many people embrace those characters because it seems like those are the only characters that have a relationship that's healthy, even in spite of the circumstances that they're in, these two are really the only depiction that we see of black love in the Game of Thrones universe. I'm so happy to see those two flourish and hopefully they'll build them out more season to season. It's hard because I tackle with it, too. As a black woman watching this show, it's such a great plot, there's so many great scenes to watch, and it's such a great story of world building from when I read the books to watching the show. Yet, the characters that are represented are either depicted as slaves or, in the books, depicted as prostitutes. That's always problematic to see that the universe was built that way.

Joanna Robinson: Absolutely. It's frustrating. You say Missandei and Grey Worm are the only example of black love and that's true, but you know, because of his mutilation, they can't consummate, so you don't get black sex, which is frustrating.

Jamie Broadnax: That's another problem that we don't see much in prime time shows. Yeah. You're absolutely right. Game of Thrones have also used rape as set dressing and we've seen this with the Dothraki raiders and their treatment of women in season one, with the Craster wives and the Night's Watch in season four. What are your thoughts about that? Again, this seems like a moment where it's just being used for the sake of being gratuitous and exploitative.

Joanna Robinson: You know what's so alarming about the season four example is that that episode's

actually directed by a woman, by Michelle MacLaren, like their only female director, actually shot that scene where there was just, yeah, background rape. I was floored. I was so shocked. Not shocked to see it in Game of Thrones, but shocked that Michelle MacLaren was like, "Yeah, that sounds about right. Let's go ahead and frame that shot with just some rape in the background." I was not a fan of that.

Jamie Broadnax: There's a lot of casual sexual brutality that happens with the Dothraki raiders. As I mentioned before, there's not many people of color in the Game of Thrones universe and because there's not many of us, the depictions that they do show of people of color are not very flattering. Seeing savage foreigners and feeding very offensive historical stereotypes of Huns, Native Americans, and others. What are your thoughts about that? Do you feel like they should try to move in another direction because of the fact that there's just not that many people of color and that the only thing that we do see of them are these scenes with the Dothraki raiders where they're casually sexually traumatizing women?

Joanna Robinson: Yeah, I mean, for that stereotype, I think we definitely have to hold George RR Martin accountable because he's the one who created this culture that he based on whatever but does feed into these stereotypes. I think what Weiss and Benioff are trying to do to help correct, it doesn't completely correct, but to help correct is that Grey Worm Missandei stuff that we talked about. You talked about how those characters, like especially this season, they were smarter than Tyrion, they're level-headed, they're pulled together. They're some of the most together people in all of the show. To have those examples to hopefully counteract. Missandei is a freed slave and Grey Worm is a free slave. They're not free completely of these stereotypical origins. I think what Weiss and Benioff are trying to do with them, I think, is give us just more positive role models for people of color on screen than Dothraki being our only option. I really think they could be more experimental with their casting. I understand that this world is trying to adhere to certain regions and mostly it's like white European Scandinavian sort of stuff, but ...

Jamie Broadnax: Then there's the Summer Isles. They can have more characters from there be introduced. They're going to have to take some creative liberties because the books really doesn't focus much on the Summer Isles, but there's so many people of color there.

Joanna Robinson: Right. They've certainly taken other narrative liberties with the show, just gone completely off the books in so many ways. To say that they wouldn't have room for that, I mean, that's not true. What's true, though, is that they tried to do this Dornish plot, but they failed. They had this opportunity and they just blew it and nobody wanted a Dorne plot and they just killed it off. The world the way it was set up did not give them a lot of opportunity and then they haven't been very brave in creating opportunities necessarily, with the couple exceptions that we mentioned.

Jamie Broadnax: I want to move on to sexual assaults and trauma as a part of the main character arc. Some examples that we've seen of this was Daenerys and Drogo in season one.

Cersei's walk of shame in season five. Sansa and Ramsay in season five, which were very, very controversial story arcs. After being sold into marriage, we'll go back to season one. After being sold into marriage and enduring a wedding night rape, Dany falls in love with Drogo and this is another example of a very overused trope of learning to love someone violent. I remember this trope was used back in the Luke and Laura days of soap operas. What are your thoughts about that overused, Stockholm Syndrome, I love my rapist trope?

Joanna Robinson: It's the worst. It's why I could never get into the romance genre because in romance novels it happens all the time. What's weird, and plenty's been written about this, is for all the rape that is in the Game of Thrones books, the wedding night between Daenerys and Drogo isn't a rape scene. It's him saying yes and her saying yes. It's this very cautious exploration. Later, she's not into the sex, she's not enjoying it later in the books, but that wedding night scene is not a rape scene. That's something the show added, which is supremely questionable. The rape that happened with Sansa Stark in season five, I will never be okay with that. There's nothing that could happen in the show that makes me okay with them making that choice.

Jamie Broadnax: It was very interesting, too, because the shot was framed directly on Theon and I wanted to know what were your thoughts about the fact that they just showed Theon's face during that scene and decided to make it an off-camera rape.

Joanna Robinson: What troubles me about it is in the books, the character who gets raped, this character Jeyne Poole who doesn't exist in the show, the violence perpetrated on her is really is all about Theon. It's about what it takes to snap Theon out of his slave state, basically, and his own Stockholm Syndrome, like trying to fix that. That's what this sexual violence does. You can't take Sansa, who's had such an important arc so far in the show, and make her a device to redeem Theon. It's so funny because Weiss and Benioff say they don't watch our feedback into consideration and it doesn't affect how they write the show, but I really see season six as a huge course correction for them. Trying to give her the most bad ass plot they could and she has her massive revenge on her rapist and all this sort of stuff as a course correction for what they did to her last year. I'm not buying it, really. I think that they do realize that, though they will never admit it, that they shouldn't have done that in season five.

Jamie Broadnax: There was another very controversial rape scene that occurs between two characters, Jamie and Cersei, in season four, episode three. Which, again, creative liberties were taken on this. What are your thoughts about that whole scene? Is there anything that they did right with it? What was done wrong? What's your overall assessment of how that was handled?

Joanna Robinson: That's such a great question. "Is there anything they did right?"

Jamie Broadnax: Nothing.

Joanna Robinson: They screwed up that scene so badly. Jamie and Cersei do have sex in the books right next to Joffery's corpse. That's a thing that happens. The advantage you have in the books, yeah, I believe it's a Cersei chapter. The advantage you have in the books is you're inside the head of the characters, so you get this internal, you know what they're thinking. It does not read rape-y at all on the page because you know what they're thinking. I think that's what they thought they were going for. They wanted to show some of the toxic relationship between Cersei and Jamie through this sex scene, but it read as rape. It read as rape to anyone watching it except for, apparently, the director. I think the director was like, "No. That's not rape." You're like, "No, buddy. No. That's a rape scene because she's saying, "No. No. No.""

I think that there's a million little things that they could've done to make that a more consensual sex scene while preserving some of the toxicity of their relationship. Having her say no and having him be so forceful with her, they screwed that up so badly and at one point, they just stopped giving interviews about it. No one would talk about it. I talked to one of the producers on the show, Bryan Cogman, who I quite like and he was like, "I'll talk to you about anything, except I won't talk about that Cersei Jamie scene." They had a gag order, right? That's sort of been their approach to a lot of controversy. I think now they're sort of like, "We're just not going to talk about it because anything we say is just going to dig us deeper." Did they do anything right in that scene? No, I don't think they did. I mean, they could've. I think you could've had a messed up sex scene that was not so rape-y or even a little bit rape-y.

Jamie Broadnax: What can shows do to prevent these kinds of really bad mistakes?

Joanna Robinson: I think exactly what we talked about earlier, which is representation behind the camera. I think if you have some women in the writer's room, and this goes beyond the sexual stuff that we talked about and to some of the race stuff that we talked about. If you have non-white, non-male people in your writer's room or directing your shows, I mean, Michelle MacLaren maybe undercuts this argument. I like her work, but yeah, buddy. There's so many times where something crazy happens. Like let's talk about another show entirely. Let's talk about The 100 really quickly where they killed of a lesbian character and it didn't even occur to them that the fandom would freak out over this. That's because they did not have any lesbians working on the show. They didn't have anyone in the room who could be like, "Hey wait a minute. This is sensitive and here's why."

I feel like probably it was all men in the women when they decided that it would be a great idea for Sansa Stark to get raped. I really wish that there had been a woman in that room, and I'm not saying she would've said, "Hey, wait a minute," but it would be a better chance for someone to say, "Hey, wait a minute." If there are more non-white people working behind the Hill ... I mean, Dave Hill is one of the main producers of the show. He's not white. If there were more people of color working on the show, I think you would have even more of a push for diversity. These are all things that I would love to see.

Jamie Broadnax: Diversity is not just tokenism. Michelle being one woman in a room filled with men, that's not diversity. It's probably more challenging for her and very intimidating for her to speak up in a room filled with men, but had it been a room filled with a lot of women and many people of color, then, certainly, I think that that rape being used as a plot device and also just seeing more representation of characters from Dorne being seen on the show would be a part of the writer's room. I think that that is something to also acknowledge that just having one marginalized person in the room doesn't necessarily mean that we're going to get the diversity that we want to see.

Joanna Robinson: Exactly.

Jamie Broadnax: Well, Joanna, thank you so, so much. This was fun. This was a great discussion. I really enjoyed chatting with you about Game of Thrones. I want you to tell our listeners where they can find you on the interwebs and give us your social media shout outs.

Joanna Robinson: Yeah, you can find me on Twitter @jowrotethis. You can hear me talking about Game of Thrones on either Storm of Spoilers or a Cast of Kings. Storm of Spoilers, right now, we're doing sort of off-season, pop culture, non-Game of Thrones stuff and it's really fun. Also on the podcast Fighting in the War Room. Of course, over on VanityFair.com.

Jamie Broadnax: Thanks, Joanna.

Joanna Robinson: Thank you so much. That was really fun. That was very healing for me. I never get to talk to women about Game of Thrones, it's always other guys.

Jamie Broadnax: Really? Wow. It's good to be able to get these issues out and talk about it. Thanks again to Joanna for joining me. We hope you enjoyed the premiere of Get It Right. Be sure to check back with us next week and throughout the fall for more pop culture analysis and exploration. You can also hear and read more from me at blackgirlnerds.com and visit our podcast, the BGN Podcast, which streams on iTunes, SoundCloud, Stitcher Radio, as well as Google Music. Get It Right is hosted by me, Jamie Broadnax. The show is produced by Marc Faletti, Rewire's Director of Multimedia. Editorial input is provided by Senior Reporter Jenn Stanley and oversight by Jodi Jacobson, Rewire's President and Editor-in-Chief.