

Interview with Denise Williams

[00:00:11] **Joce** Hello, I'm Joce. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim the bookshelf and read the world. Today, I'm talking to Denise Williams about her latest book, *THE FASTEST WAY TO FALL*, which is out now from Berkley Romance. You can find a complete transcript of this episode on our website, readingwomenpodcast.com. And don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:32] **Joce** I am beyond excited today to bring you this interview with Denise Williams, the author of her newest release *THE FASTEST WAY TO FALL*, which just came out in early November. *THE FASTEST WAY TO FALL* is the romance novel about our heroine, Britta Colby, who is a writer for a lifestyle website. And she is trying to vie for a full-time writing position and writing about her experience with FitMi, which is a new body-positive fitness app, which is not at all focused on weight loss, but rather is about finding joy with movement and body confidence. Then, of course, we have our love interest, Wes, who is the CEO of FitMi and Britta's personal trainer who has a complex family situation. And he goes back to personal training because he loves to teach, and Britta is his first client back. Of course, there is a slight issue that they start to fall for each other. And that Britta is reviewing his app. But you know, that's all part of the tension and the slow burn of their romance, which originally starts off as kind of like a friend coaching type situation. But again, we'll get there when we get there.

[00:01:34] **Joce** I love this book so much because the way that health and fitness are framed are not from a shame-based perspective, but rather from a place of confidence and finding joy in movement and our body's capabilities. And of course, I also adore the slow burn of the fact that they connected over messaging first. Denise Williams also incorporates aspects of mental health into the story, so there is a content warning for addiction and talk of eating disorders and fatphobia. In the interview, we talked about how Britta's story is so much more than just her body and just fitness, though, even though it does center around the fitness app. But it's more so about the relationship and celebrating love and celebrating herself. It's so wonderful. I highly recommend it.

[00:02:17] **Joce** But before the interview, let me tell you a little bit more about Denise. Denise Williams wrote her first book in the second grade, *I HATE YOU*, and a sequel, *I STILL HATE YOU*. It featured a tough, funny heroine, a quirky hero, witty banter, and a dragon. Minus the dragon, these are still the books that she likes to write. After penning those early works, she finished second grade and eventually earned a Ph.D. in education, going on to work in higher education. After growing up a military brat around the world and across the country, Denise now lives in Des Moines, Iowa, with her husband, son, and two ornery Shih Tzus who think they own the house. And without any further ado, here is my interview with Denise Williams.

[00:02:57] **Joce** Hi, Denise, welcome to the Reading Women podcast.

[00:03:08] **Denise** Hi, thank you so much for having me.

[00:03:10] **Joce** Oh my gosh, of course. I knew I had to have you on the podcast after reading your latest release, *THE FASTEST WAY TO FALL*. And by the way, congratulations.

[00:03:18] **Denise** Thank you. It's been a bit of a whirlwind month.

[00:03:21] **Joce** Oh my gosh, I feel like it's been because I know that your first book, HOW TO FAIL AT FLIRTING, came out kind of during pandemic-ish times, right?

[00:03:29] **Denise** Yeah, it came out last December. So we were . . . we were just right in the thick of things.

[00:03:33] **Joce** Oh my gosh. How has that been for you, having two books come out during pandemic times?

[00:03:38] **Denise** You know, honestly, that . . . that was my debut. And so, you know, in some ways, it's maybe better because I don't know any different. So.

[00:03:46] **Joce** Yeah, for sure.

[00:03:47] **Denise** Like I saw all my friends debut in a pandemic. And then I debuted in the pandemic. And then book two, you know, it was like, oh, okay, we do virtual. We get our books printed on masks. And that's just normal. But it has been kind of cool with the second book, being able to do some in-person things that I didn't get to do with the first book. And so I have. . . . This weekend, I got to do a couple of signings and just eked out any time I got to talk to literally anybody in person. A five year old brought me a book that I did not write, and I still talked to him for like five minutes. And so that's kind of amazing and almost like getting to debut again.

[00:04:21] **Joce** Oh my gosh. Five year olds are our harshest critics, aren't they?

[00:04:24] **Denise** I have one. And so yes, he told me my book had no pictures, and it was not worth his time. And he wasn't going to read it.

[00:04:31] **Joce** I'm sure my three year old would say the same.

[00:04:33] **Denise** Yeah. Like, okay, that's harsh, but fair because I don't really want you to read it quite yet.

[00:04:38] **Joce** Yes, absolutely. Well, before we get too enveloped in preschool, would you mind introducing yourself and your book for our listeners today?

[00:04:46] **Denise** Oh, of course. I'm Denise Williams. I use she/her pronouns. And I wrote THE FASTEST WAY TO FALL and HOW TO FAIL AT FLIRTING as we already talked about. I love romance. I've always loved romance. But I actually had not planned to be a writer in my day job. I work in university. I have a Ph.D. in education. And my research has very little to no kissing in it. And so this is a switch to romance, but I love that I get to kind of work these two sides of my brain. I grew up around the world. I grew up in the military. But now I am in Iowa, which is smack dab in the middle of the country. And so a lot of my stories take place kind of in the middle of the US, which just kind of feels very comfortable for me. This one took place in Chicago in Illinois. And yeah, I . . . let's see . . . I have a five year old who keeps me very busy, two dogs who think they own my house, the chickens you probably heard in my intro. And I love talking about romance, so I'm really excited to talk about this one. As a personal note, this story is about a fat woman, which I have been my whole life. I probably will be my whole life. And so I love writing all of my different books. And we can talk later, maybe, about other books that are coming up. This one, for me, was so much of my own story and my own heart in a different way than the first book was. And it has been really exciting for it to be out in the world.

[00:06:06] **Joce** Oh my gosh, I am so excited again to have you on the podcast. But also I feel like this book is so special and so personal, just reading your author's note at the end of the book. So I'm wondering, where did you start with the concept of this book?

[00:06:19] **Denise** Yeah, actually, it started—and I'm on my lunch break right now—and so it's great to share that it actually started in a work thing. So I work in higher education. I work with college students. And we make people reflect a lot. And candidly between you, me, and everyone listening, I hate self-reflection. I hate it when somebody else makes me do it, and I have to sit quietly and be with my thoughts, even though I make people do it all the time. But I was at an activity, and we were doing that. So I was playing along since I was part of the group that was planning it. And we asked students to think about the last time they felt strong—or some iteration of that question. And so I was thinking about it for myself. And at the time, I thought about being at my gym and on the elliptical and just crushing like an awesome workout and defeating the person next to me. And that person was probably in their 70s, and they did not know we were competing. But I knew we were competing. And I just thought about that moment. And I just finished writing HOW TO FAIL AT FLIRTING. I was trying to acquire a literary agent and to publish that. And I just thought, you know, what do I want to write next? And what would it mean to fall in love in that moment, when you step off the elliptical and you feel like you could, you know, in that instant, just like take over the world—that you could do anything. And to, like, fall in love in that moment.

[00:07:31] **Denise** And that is kind of where the inspiration for this story was born and thinking about how can I tell that love story that's about feeling strong and being strong, but also meeting that person and finding that person who makes you feel stronger? And then I wrote it. And then I edited it for three years because it wasn't good the first time I wrote it. But you know that it kind of ended up in its final form. But it really started from that moment of, you know, tell me about a moment that you felt strong.

[00:08:02] **Joce** Oh my gosh, that's so amazing. And because I feel like when we go to the gym, we're so inundated with messages from whether it be advertisements, you know, other folks trying to sell us shakes in the lobby, you know, whatever it may be that are so tied to shame and based around hatred of our body. They're trying to sell us things based on hatred of our body. So I just love so much that this book came from a place of strength and not from a place of shame or hatred.

[00:08:26] **Denise** I, you know, it was so interesting writing this. When I first pitched it, the response I got from a lot of people was like, "Oh no, you can't talk about a fat woman and exercise. Like, that doesn't. . . . That'll be body shaming." Well, why is that our immediate response? Like, why can't we just talk about bodies? And what does it matter? And there's a lot of reasons to have that concern, for sure. And so I thought that was interesting that was my first response. And as I started writing it, I wrote it kind of from my worldview. And then as my friends, and fellow readers, my editor were giving me feedback, I even saw some things that were, you know, unconscious in my own practice. Like, there's a whole bit in the book about guilty pleasure foods. And they're the heroine who's writing about this kind of does a little exploration of that terminology. And that actually is something that I thought about more as I was writing the book and like, oh yeah, what does it mean to call a thing a guilty pleasure? Like, let's unpack that. And then I found myself doing self-reflection, which I usually hate. But it was for a book, so it was good. And so that was, for me, like a really cool thing that I was able to challenge some things just in my own thinking and my own biases and my own, you know, kind of. . . . We move through this sort of

socially constructed world about how we're supposed to look at our bodies. And that was really neat for me to be able to interrogate some of that for myself, even in just editing this book and building this character out.

[00:09:45] **Joce** My gosh, I was going to say, nothing like that self-reflection, things that make you sit with yourself for a little bit, however uncomfortable that may be.

[00:09:53] **Denise** It's true. And when you're editing a book, you don't really have a choice.

[00:09:56] **Joce** It's true. That is also true. I was also going to ask you, kind of going on that theme of strength versus hate and shame for our bodies. Something that is so prone to diet culture and disordered behaviors are these like terrible fitness apps, you know. And we hear about them all the time. But you have two fitness apps in your book. There's FitMi, and then there's HotRU. How did you want to construct these two apps in your book, knowing that some really kind of disordered stuff goes on in real life?

[00:10:27] **Denise** Yeah, I actually was chatting with somebody about this yesterday at a book club group. And they asked where did I learn about the app. I was like, I've been on a lot of the apps throughout my life. Like, I've done, you know, My Fitness Pal. And I was on Noom for a minute and, you know, several other ones. And you know, I think some of them definitely promote some toxic things. Some of them just, you know, are somewhat neutral. And some, I'm sure do some good work. But when I thought about this app, the FitMi app—which is the one that our heroine joins and that our hero owns—I really just thought, you know, how can I make this the most body-positive fitness app that has ever existed? And it might not even actually ever work as a real app, but I don't have to build it or sell it. So that's fine. But I love the idea that—you know—this app, when people are signing up for the digital personal training, they say right away, we will not work with you on weight loss. That is not our focus. That's not our philosophy. Here's what it means if that's what you want to focus on. Here's some other ways you can do that. But that's a very clear message from the beginning. And that's kind of just reiterated in every time we see the company—that it really is about health; it's about wellness; it's about strength. And I wanted to counter that with the other app, which I did want to have more of a focus on kind of hotness. And that app does end up being a bit toxic for several reasons.

[00:11:47] **Joce** Yes.

[00:11:48] **Denise** But actually their initial approach was somewhat similar. You know, that, there's . . . there's body positivity, but it was more about hotness than kind of health or fitness. And I have a ton of content that I actually cut about the apps and the background of the apps. Maybe I'll release that someday because I just kind of had fun constructing those and building them. But for the FitMi app, that's really where I tried to come from. I used to work with a personal trainer. And I would think about some of the things that she had said or that I had read that had been really affirming or that I'd seen, you know, be really effective for people and tried to kind of mesh that into this one . . . this one fake company that. . . . And I will say, just as an aside, I'll never write an app into a book again because I named this when I was writing it in 2018, and the app didn't exist. And then when the copy editor sent me notes early in 2021, they're like, "Oh, this is a real app. Did you mean that?" Like, no!

[00:12:44] **Joce** Oh no.

[00:12:45] **Denise** So, okay, let me find another app. And then spent a week and a half with friends trying to brainstorm any fitness-related thing that didn't already exist as a real app.

[00:12:54] **Joce** Oh gosh. And then Ctrl+F replace every single one in your book.

[00:12:58] **Denise** Yes. Yes, so the apps were almost called like blurg-a-blurg and flurg-a-flurg because I just couldn't find anything. But we landed on something. So, yeah, that's kind of where the apps came from. But I think a lot of us have been on those apps and, you know, liked different things and were challenged by different things and had different experiences. And so I tried to pull all the good things I remembered into this one app.

[00:13:23] **Joce** Gosh, absolutely. Speaking of our app owner and founder, Wes. . . . Oh my gosh, he is so lovely. He adores Britta. He gets to know her first without knowing what she looks like. And he just loves everything about her. So supportive. I love him so much. How does his character come to be?

[00:13:41] **Denise** I had so much fun writing him. And funny enough, like in the first draft, I sent that to some friends. And they're like, "Oh, we love the story. We love Wes. Britta's kind of a robot. The heroine. And I was like, No, no way! And then I got it back. And I was like, oh my gosh, like, I spent so much time writing him. . . . She didn't have friends. She didn't have personality. She wasn't that funny. She was just kind of flat. So I had to go back and edit her. And I really love that character now.

[00:14:06] **Denise** But Wes is in the first book. He's in HOW TO FAIL AT FLIRTING. And I'd actually written this one already or started drafting it. And I knew I wanted him to be . . . have some cohesion. And so I actually went back and added him to the first book because I just love that character so much. And he is physically strong. He was a college athlete. He's a fitness trainer. He owns a fitness company. He works out all the time. But his strength is really, you know, it's emotional strength. He has a challenging family life. His mom is . . . is an addict. And his . . . has some different issues with his sister. And he's kind of been holding that in for most of his life and just trying to help other people without really taking care of himself. And in that way, I think there are two journeys aligned. But ultimately, you know, if you look at the two characters side by side, he's helping her work out and find strength that way, but she's really the one who is saving him. You know, if anybody is kind of being saved in the narrative, it's her saving him in terms of that emotional wellness. And I thought that tied so well with the physical strength that so many of us have that work to do to build up our own emotional strength and to be . . . feel strong, being vulnerable, and some of those pieces.

[00:15:23] **Joce** Speaking of self-reflection, I feel like he does a lot of self-reflection throughout the book, especially maybe in like the last third of it. There was a lot of . . . a lot of that going on.

[00:15:32] **Denise** Yeah, he really, really does, in part because he kind of has to. He's, you know, just like, "I'm angry. And why am I angry? And why am I sad? And why am I kind of confronting those things?" And so I sort of joke sometimes that my brand as an author is that somebody is going to therapy as part of the happily ever after. And in this instance, Wes is getting counseling by the end of the book and seeking out help. And I think that's just part of my . . . all my books now, all my novels. Somebody is going to therapy at the end.

[00:16:00] **Joce** You know, sometimes that does happen. Sometimes that as part of the happily ever after. So.

[00:16:04] **Denise** Yeah, probably should be a part of more people's happily ever after.

[00:16:07] **Joce** It should be a prerequisite for every romance novel that gets an HEA, right?

[00:16:12] **Denise** Happily ever before.

[00:16:14] **Joce** Exactly, exactly. So I also wanted to ask. So Wes's sister has an eating disorder history. So I'm wondering how she kind of maybe fits into the greater journey of the book, if you will?

[00:16:27] **Denise** Yeah. So Wes's younger sister had an eating disorder. Most of our visuals of her in the book is from the past, and she had one then. We don't really get to see her in the present day much, but that shaped a lot of things kind of about how she dealt with their mom's addiction. And he definitely has some guilt about being able to kind of save her, care for her, fix things for her, which of course, that isn't how . . . eating disorders . . . that doesn't how any, like, mental health or physical health really works. Somebody else can't just save us. But he has a lot of guilt tied to that. And that's in part why, you know, he's kind of struggling to ask for help because he feels like he should be the one kind of saving and helping. And he wasn't able to "save" his sister, to help his sister. She ends up running away from home. And he has very disparate communication with her. And so that shapes him in a lot of ways.

[00:17:18] **Denise** As the book opens, he's a . . . he's just under like a literal storm cloud. I think I made it raining the first time you meet him. And he's just . . . he's in a pretty dark place in terms of figuring out where he is personally and professionally. And I actually kind of liked writing that too, the strong hero who is also kind of unhappy in his work and unhappy in his life and trying to find that. Also, I'd say, as he's looking at his profession now running the health and fitness app, his sister's eating disorder wasn't the direct reason to start the app that he ever talks about. But it's always on his mind in terms of, you know, what could have maybe been a resource to—Libby is the character's name—in that . . . in that space? Or you know what, if somebody is going through something similar to what she is, how can I build something that might help them? And that's kind of his whole journey.

[00:18:08] **Denise** And initially, in the first draft of the book, she had actually passed away. And as I was writing it and editing it, folks were like, "That's pretty dark. It's a romance. Could we have that work in some other way?" And so now she's alive. And we get to see her doing well, you know, at the end of the book. And that is in part for Wes too, like that . . . bringing around . . . bringing his journey around in terms of realizing that you can't save somebody else, that you don't need to save somebody else but him figuring out how to be there for somebody without him controlling a situation. I rambled on a lot there. I don't know that cohesive to your question. But that character was interesting to write because she really exists almost solely in Wes's memory. She's not really on the page, except for some text messages. She is not kind of an active part of his life, but is an active part of his thoughts kind of at all times.

[00:19:01] **Joce** You know, I think that makes so much sense, just kind of in the context of his character, the way that he presents. I feel like, just throughout the book, there was this

one particular instance that I'm remembering where Wes brings over some pizza for Britta. And no spoilers there. But that's all that I'll let you guys know. But I think that especially in that moment, he was really mindful to check in with her about like, "Hey, like, are you okay with eating this? Is this okay in the context of what we're going through emotionally?" And I just found that so lovely that he was just so caring and mindful and thoughtful about everything that he did.

[00:19:33] **Denise** I love that moment. And I rewrote that scene so many times. There were like six different things that they ate.

[00:19:37] **Joce** It's a good one.

[00:19:40] **Denise** But ultimately, I really liked that moment where he questions himself and is like, "Oh, maybe I shouldn't have brought food. Or maybe, is this okay?" And you know, also that he doesn't know the right answers because I think sometimes if we are with somebody, and we don't know exactly what to say, so often we don't say anything. And so I like that he kind of stumbled over like, "Oh, I thought this was the right thing, but maybe it's not the right thing. And are you okay? And I'll do something different." And I think that's a moment of vulnerability for him kind of early on in the relationship that I, ultimately, I really like how that scene landed. But I did rewrite that several times.

[00:20:15] **Joce** My gosh. Absolutely. It also just reminds me of the cover, well, at least the American cover. Of like, they're just kind of like running together, side by side. Like, it's just so lovely. I don't know. I just love Wes. Can you tell I really like him?

[00:20:28] **Denise** I really do too. Liz Parks, who is this amazing artist, did some preorder art for me. And it's up on my social media. And she actually just put up a sketch this morning of the couple. And I could stare at that all day because you get to see their faces. Because on the American version of the book, you don't see their faces. They're running, and you see kind of behind them. And on the UK version, you see their faces, but it's not a lot of detail. But I do love on both of those covers that. . . . And it was important to me like Britta is a fat woman. She owns that word. She uses it kind of without attaching shame or anything to it. And so on the cover, when we were designing the US one, the designer probably got sick of me because I was like, okay, I want her butt just a little bit bigger. I want her thighs a little thicker. I want less gap. I want more stomach. And I love how she turned out and her body, and they were so responsive to that.

[00:21:18] **Denise** And on the UK cover, I really just said, well, she's a fat woman. And they were like, okay.

[00:21:23] **Joce** I love it.

[00:21:24] **Denise** And I was like, oh, okay, y'all got that like right off the bat. And my favorite thing about the UK cover—which is in Australia and South Africa and a few other places too—is that there's a sliver of her stomach showing.

[00:21:34] **Joce** Mm-Hmm.

[00:21:35] **Denise** And I think about that all the time now. For me, like, so much of my life was and even still, like, oh, no. No crop tops. Can't like . . . can't show the belly. Like, that's not. . . . I don't know. That's just like a message I had in my head about fashion. And that it's on the book has made me almost a little braver to be like, well, yeah, like, I've got a

belly. It's a fat belly. I can still show it. I can still wear a crop top if I want to if it's hot. And that's just a small detail. And I don't know if other people would even notice it, but that's the first thing my eye always goes to when I see the UK cover.

[00:22:08] **Joce** Oh my gosh, you know, I'm so sure that there are most definitely people that are out there that have noticed it. And I think it's so important, you know, that artists are responsive to authors when they're like, "Here's how I want to represent my character. Here's what my character looks like." Because so oftentimes, you know, characters are misrepresented in that they're drawn too thin, you know, or they're represented too thin, or they're represented too light. And I just think that that is so nice that your artists were very responsive in working with you.

[00:22:34] **Denise** Oh, yeah, I just love it. I have them up in my office and the copies and the framed pictures and everything. And that just made me really happy. And I know I hear readers about, you know, what it means to see big hips or, you know, the belly exposed on, like, the UK version. And I know what that means for me when I see that in a book.

[00:22:54] **Joce** Yeah. Oh my gosh. I feel like this reminds me of another instance in the book. And this is one of Britta's pieces or articles that she's writing. And she's talking about how she didn't like yoga in the past or was maybe hesitant to, I don't know, participate in yoga classes. But she saw a fat Black woman leading a yoga class on YouTube, and she became more open to the practice. And I think she talks about that in that writing piece. I think maybe that is what that reminds me of a little bit.

[00:23:19] **Denise** Yeah. And so for folks who haven't read the book yet, Britta is reviewing this body-positive fitness app, but she's not really just reviewing it. She's kind of talking about her journey. So all of her chapters start with an excerpt from a social media post or a, you know, a live she might have been doing on Instagram or a blog post. And that was kind of my way for her to talk about health and fitness more directly with the reader because this is what she'd be putting out. And yeah, I had some friends who were talking about—and I forget the woman's name—but was leading yoga on YouTube and how much they loved it and how it made them want to do it and feel comfortable trying it. And I just thought about, you know, how many other people might that be the case when you see somebody who looks like us trying something, how that can be so powerful in us trying it too?

[00:24:06] **Joce** I also feel like maybe at that point in the book, I was noticing how many likes she was getting on her writing pieces. You know, her pieces were getting more traction. She was maybe becoming more confident in who she was and exploring joyful movement maybe at that time too.

[00:24:21] **Denise** Yeah, and that was kind of fun with the social media part. So that's like a subtle kind of Easter egg that her likes kind of do increase as you see them all. But also, I had to come up with all these screen names. And so multiple screen names are tied to people who are in my acknowledgments or to some friends, and there's some pretty funny ones. @NoMoreNosePickers is a real person who I've known for twenty years. And so that was just some kind of Easter eggs that most people probably wouldn't notice. But, you know, as my friends or family or colleagues are reading through it or some other authors, they'll kind of see that . . . that reference to themselves in the social media post.

[00:24:54] **Joce** My gosh, that's amazing. I feel like as parents of young children, "No More Nose Pickers" resonates very well.

[00:25:00] **Denise** Oh my gosh. Oh my goodness. Yes.

[00:25:05] **Joce** We could have a person post it up at our preschool that, uh, especially in COVID times, no more nose pickers.

[00:25:11] **Denise** I mean, that's the upside of the masks, I guess. It's harder to do it, but.

[00:25:14] **Joce** It's true. It's true. You can't quite get a finger in there.

[00:25:18] **Denise** Yeah.

[00:25:20] **Joce** Oh my gosh. Speaking of—kind of rewinding a little bit—I feel like another moment in the book like we talked about before is that we're debunking the phrase "guilty pleasures" when we speak about food and reframing them as comfort foods. Why were these things important for you to include?

[00:25:39] **Denise** You know, that is something that, honestly, I learned from somebody else when I was doing editing. I had the whole thing. And she was talking about, "Here's my guilty pleasure food, and here's why I'm going to eat it anyway." And I don't think the message was bad. But my friend was like, "Well, you know, how are you using that word? Could she interrogate that?" And it's honestly something I had never thought about. And I would have plenty of foods that I would have called my guilty pleasure foods. And I don't know if I felt guilt on a level that I really felt bad about it. But I did look at that food as like, well, I'll feel guilty about it later when that happens. And so once I got that view from my friend, I started thinking about how many of us just think about that and then use that terminology and really don't think about the meaning that it describes.

[00:26:22] **Denise** And so I don't think going into writing this book—and not even that I don't think; I know—going into writing this book, that wasn't important to me. It wasn't something I'd ever even thought about. But I liked that the character was kind of investigating it and investigating it kind of in a way that I was. Like in so many ways, Britta's kind of thought processes . . . it's just me working stuff out on the page. And so having her think through that same thing that I did of, you know, what does it mean for us to describe guilt or worthiness to food? And how does that shape our outlook? And how can that be toxic in terms of, you know, a lot of different things? And I love that when the piece ends—it's just a short little excerpt—she hasn't quite figured it out yet. I think it ends with her saying, "I'm going to deal with that later. Right now, I'm just going to eat this Chinese food and feel comfortable about it." Or this pizza. I don't remember what she's eating. But yeah, that . . . then again, there's many instances of things like that that I just really hadn't thought about until I sent the book off to these very smart people who made me think about it and maybe reframe some things.

[00:27:25] **Joce** I love that. And I feel like, you know, another place where that phrase is used is when we talk about romance novels in general. You know, it's not like. . . . I find that, especially when I talk to folks that are maybe in academia is that they're kind of like hush hush about reading romance novels, you know? It's just, like, guilty pleasure. It's just something that I go home and do by myself in secret. And I'm like, No. Like, romance novels are to be celebrated. Not everything has to be a little life, you know?

[00:27:49] **Denise** Oh, completely. And I work in higher education. I work in administration. I'm not in the faculty. But when I first started writing, and people'd say, "What are you

writing?" I'd whisper that I was writing a book. And then in a lower register, I'd say it's romance. And then in a barely audible sound, I would say, "Thirsty meat." And so many people were curious or said, "Oh, I read romance too." But nobody was talking about it because it felt like something that was taboo. And it's not a "smart" book and all of this. And I had held those thoughts a different place in my life too. But now I feel like I'm in a kind of a privileged position. I've been at my university a long time. I'm not directly in the . . . in one of the departments. I said I work in administration. And so I feel like I can challenge that. And that has been kind of fun to just talk openly about, like, oh, well, you, this is what romance is. And this is what it isn't.

[00:28:39] **Denise** And I teach a class with a friend of mine on romance novels as tools for social justice. And we call it "moving past bodice ripping to shredding the patriarchy." And that has been a ton of fun to investigate a lot of intersectional patriarchal structures. And we look at body size as one of the units that we do, religion, and race, different iterations of feminism, sexuality, gender expression. So many different lenses. And romance novels are an excellent tool to do that. And so that has been kind of fun too. And if somebody really gives me attitude, I just kind of drop them like, "Oh, well, my book was published by Penguin Random House. How you livin'?" And, you know, get a little petty.

[00:29:24] **Joce** I love it.

[00:29:24] **Denise** But I've had more support than anything else, but I do think that it is guilty pleasure is . . . I . . . you know . . . I'll usually just jokingly say like, "pleasure is never guilty." And we should all read what we want. But also that, you know, romance novels can tackle issues, heavy issues, important social issues in a way that people still want to read it because I could write an essay on, you know, guilty pleasure foods and probably not that many people would read it. I'm not an expert, so I don't know why I'm writing that. But you know, I could do that. And from an academic setting, a lot of people might read that. But I'm attaching it to a love story, and that's getting that message out in a different way that's maybe more digestible, no pun intended. And so, you know, I try to raise those things in spaces where I can. But I do find, at least in my corner of academia, people have been super supportive. I'm going to be speaking to a class in a few weeks about writing love scenes. It's a human sexuality course here on campus, a big lecture. And yeah, I'm going to be talking about writing love scenes and what that looks like to write consent and to, you know, to write kind of socially, consciously while still making something fun to read and sexy and all of those things.

[00:30:36] **Joce** Oh my gosh. Your classes sound amazing. Where can I sign up for them? Do you work in admissions too? Like, can I get into your classes?

[00:30:45] **Denise** I'm sure they would enroll you if you wanted to pay the tuition.

[00:30:49] **Joce** I'm sure, I'm sure. Anything for tuition, right?

[00:30:51] **Denise** Yes, exactly. Exactly.

[00:30:54] **Joce** My gosh, I love it. Why don't we shift gears a little bit?

[00:30:58] **Denise** Okay.

[00:30:58] **Joce** I really wanted to introduce our listeners to your previous novel, obviously, HOW TO FAIL AT FLIRTING, which I loved as well, and actually takes place as a nice

segue in a more academic setting. Maybe if you could tell us a little bit more about the book and maybe the relationship to Wes and Britta in this book?

[00:31:14] **Denise** Yeah. So HOW TO FAIL AT FLIRTING is a single point of view from Dr. Naya Turner, who is a math education professor. The story largely takes place in Chicago in the middle of the US. It's a large urban setting. And she is a few years out of an abusive relationship that was connected to her work. And while she is out of that relationship and away at least temporarily from that toxic person, she has not really dealt with her own trauma yet. So as the book opens, you see her kind of closed off, skittish, and a lot of other things. And she's challenged by some friends and challenged by herself that she wants to reclaim her life. And as any Type-A person with a plan does, she makes it to-do list. And it does not involve therapy. At least not yet. But decides like, I can just will myself to be better. And I'm going to go out. And I'm going to meet somebody. I'm going to meet somebody at a bar. I'm going to have a one-night stand. And I'm just going to power through this healing thing.

[00:32:13] **Denise** And so she does go out. And she does meet somebody. She meets the hero on the first night, and they have kind of this instant chemistry. And he is somebody who makes her feel safe in a way that nobody has before. And she, again, she still has a lot of trauma narratives that are happening for her. And that doesn't just go away. But he is somebody that really validates her and helps her. And kind of alongside of him starts to reclaim not only her sex life—which she does quite a bit in that book—but, you know, to find herself again. And so while this—the second book—is really ultimately a story about strength, I would say the first book is ultimately about finding and loving the person who you are and acknowledging kind of what you've been shaped by. And so in that book, she has a to-do list. She keeps moving through it while she's getting to know this hero and falling in love with him and then also dealing with uncertainty in her work, where she's put all her energy, dealing with sexual harassment and the return of her abuser in the work setting, and navigating all of that kind of while falling in love.

[00:33:19] **Denise** And something I just loved about writing this book—and I have loved seeing that readers have responded to—is people who have been in spaces like that, whether it was a violent relationship or toxic relationship or harassment at work or whatever it was. . . . But I've heard from so many readers that they loved seeing a love story with somebody who was like them. And I think that that simultaneity of experiences is so important to show—not in every story because sometimes we want an escape—but to know that we can be touched by hard stuff. We can be touched by trauma. We can be, you know, shaped by toxic environments. And we can be dealing with that and wrestling with that, and we can still have laughter. We can still have love. And we can still flirt horribly. And we can still have good sex—or great sex. And you know, all of those things can exist at the same time and that that can be real for people. And so I really loved that in the character. For folks who are thinking about reading it, there is a content warning on my website if you want to get into the details before you read it because there is some heavy content, but layered on top of that, you really get a fun, light, sexy love story where two people find each other and figure out how to make each other happen.

[00:34:31] **Joce** My gosh, I love that. And, you know, also with THE FASTEST WAY TO FALL, obviously you include content about eating disorders. Wes's mother also is struggling with addiction throughout the entire book. How do you find that balance between some of the heavier content that you write and kind of like the lighter and also sexier scenes that you write?

[00:34:52] **Denise** I wish I knew. You know, when I started writing romance, they're like, oh, you can't write a romance that includes domestic violence, and you can't write a fat woman who's getting into exercise. And I guess I just like to touch third rails because I did that anyway. And bless my publisher and my agent for supporting me in that. But I think it's, you know, thinking about what would the character be experiencing? And sometimes our, you know, our trauma, the heavy stuff is the story, and sometimes it's the character. And I see that a lot in my writing because I think you can center a story around. . . . A story can be about domestic violence or relationship violence or eating disorders. And that's the story. But you can also tell a different story where the character has this, you know, in their life. And I think that's a subtle difference, but I think it shapes what the character is focused on. So that you know when, with Naya, who's the character in HOW TO FAIL AT FLIRTING, her experiences in that relationship and the trauma she suffered are just part of . . . that shaped how she reacts to everything. That's just the character. That's . . . that's not the story wholly. That's the character. And the story is more than the love and the relationship. But that's the place I try to come from.

[00:36:09] **Denise** But I always write first drafts. And then I send that out to people who know a lot of things, who have had this experience themselves, who were—in the case of the first one—who were advocates and have worked maybe in different counseling settings. With this latest book, folks who work in kinesiology or fitness or health, or just people who identify as fat or who have gone on exercise journeys. And so I get a lot of outside takes too and then go back and figure out, where am I striking that balance so it feels real but it's also fun because, you know, in some ways it is an escape. It is still that flirty romance. It's still the bad puns. And it's still the kind of cute moments on dates and making sure that those are balanced in a way.

[00:36:56] **Joc** I really feel that. And I think maybe that's one thing that I really do love about your books is that, you know, folks that we meet in real life, you know, no one is just their disorder. You know, no one is just their relationship to exercise or just, you know, their domestic violence history, right? It's like folks who have these things in their history or things that they're dealing with, for example, reclaiming the relationship to exercise are also navigating relationships, you know. And I think that's why I love reading your characters is because they feel like such a whole person.

[00:37:24] **Denise** That means so much to hear because that's what I always . . . that's what I always shoot for. And I read a lot of novels. And if I'm going to set something down and not come back to it, it's usually because I feel like the character is not a full person. And so that was always my goal. So thank you. Thank you. I'm putting up like the heart hands on the video. I don't know why I'm doing that because I know you can't see me. But.

[00:37:44] **Joc** Yes, we've turned our video off. That's right.

[00:37:46] **Denise** That means a ton to hear because I just, I don't know. I like you to know my characters and, in the end, to kind of know the good, the bad, and the ugly. I usually make my heroes a little too perfect, and then I have to go back and rough them up. And I usually make my heroines a little too sarcastic, and I usually don't ever change that because I like them like that.

[00:38:05] **Joc** Perfect. I love it. Maybe our last question here before we end is, I'm so curious, what is next for you?

[00:38:14] **Denise** Oh yeah. So I have four books that'll be out in 2022. And I just sent the last one of them to my editor like twelve hours ago, so I'm really excited about it. So the third novel, which will follow this last one, is called DO YOU TAKE THIS MAN? And it centers Britta's best friend, R. J. And R. J. is a divorce attorney and kind of a tough-as-nails—I describe her as a bad ass—who doesn't really believe in romantic love. She's all in for Britta and Wes's love story in the end. But other than that, she's pretty down on romance. But she does get ordained so that she can perform Britta and Wes's wedding. (Spoiler. They get together.) And she's in a park down in North Carolina, where she's working as a divorce attorney. And this couple gets engaged. And she kind of gets swept up in the moment. And they want to get married right away. And she says, "You know, I'm ordained." So she puts the ceremony together for them on the fly. And it goes viral because it turns out the two who got engaged are celebrities, who you might know these are celebrities. So she finds herself in this weird place of being tough-as-nails-in-the-courtroom-divorce-attorney-doesn't-really-believe-in-romantic-love, but it's also a hotly sought after wedding officiant. And it turns out she actually really loves it. And I'm ordained to perform weddings. I do that for some friends and family. And so that was so fun to write into a character.

[00:39:34] **Denise** And she likes it. But she ends up having to work with a wedding planner who she describes as a dude bro. And Lear was an event planner in the National Football League and the NFL American football. And he is. . . . His life falls apart for a variety of reasons. He gets fired. And he has to come home. And he's helping his cousin plan weddings. And he has left the nice-guy thing that he'd always adopted back in California, back on the West Coast to come back and kind of just be a tough guy and not let anything hurt him. And so in their first meeting, they run into each other. And she calls him every expletive in the book, and he tells her to smile more. So they really actively hate each other from the beginning. I promise he redeems himself from the "smile more" comment. But it turns into kind of enemies to lovers, enemies with benefits—it's a pretty steamy book. And then ultimately, they fall in love. And that one is a little bit lighter. They're still a little bit of kind of heavier in real-life things going on, but that was a lot of fun to write. And I wrote that book mid-pandemic. And so for me, that was definitely an escape. And I love writing these kind of sarcastic, witty characters who just have a lot of fun with each other and are super competitive.

[00:40:47] **Joce** Oh my gosh. I love it.

[00:40:47] **Denise** So that one will be out next September. And if folks have the at least the US version of the printed book, they're the first chapters in the back of it.

[00:40:57] **Joce** Oh yeah, that's right.

[00:40:58] **Denise** In THE FASTEST WAY TO FALL.

[00:40:58] **Joce** Yes.

[00:40:58] **Denise** So that will be out in September. And then in May, June, and July (or maybe April, May, June—they're still working it out), I have three novellas that'll be out in e-book and audio. And they all take place in and around an airport. So the first one is an airport dog groomer meets her . . . what I call her Diet Coke break . . . the guy she's been scoping out when he gets kind of on and off his flight. And they run into each other because of a runaway dog. And it turns out he is a romance author and in need of some inspiration. And so the two of them have these kind of fake dating relationships inside the

airport. So think of all the places you could have a date inside of an airport, and that is what they do. And they get to know each other. And there's a lot kind of about risk and taking risks and what's worth the risk. And so that one's called THE LOVE CONNECTION. The second is called THE MISSED CONNECTION. And it's two people who meet on a New Year's Eve during a flight delay and share kind of a serendipitous kiss. And they never see each other again until a few months later when they realize they're actually academic rivals, and they have to travel together on a five-city tour as kind of warring professors. And of course, they built some . . . built some connections along the way. It's very much kind of a grumpy sunshine story. And I had so much fun with that one too. And then the . . . That one's called THE MISSED CONNECTION. And then the last is called THE SWEETEST CONNECTION, which is two airport employees who are best friends, and they find a missing love letter. And they have five days to figure out who the love letter belongs to before one of them leaves the country. And of course, that whole search mirrors their own relationship and the pining they've been doing for each other for several years. And so that one will be out, I think, in July.

[00:42:38] **Joce** Oh my gosh. You have a big year coming up in 2022.

[00:42:42] **Denise** I do. I'm just excited that they're all written now.

[00:42:47] **Joce** Oh my gosh, I can't wait to read them. And you know, my favorite word in romance novels is "pining." I love pining. I love angst.

[00:42:54] **Denise** So much angst. So much angst.

[00:42:57] **Joce** It's the best. Oh my gosh. Well, thank you so much for coming on the podcast today. I really appreciate your time. And all of you, if you've not read THE FASTEST WAY TO FALL and HOW TO FAIL AT FLIRTING, please go and pick them up. They're . . . they're so good.

[00:43:12] **Denise** Thank you so much for having me. This was such fun conversation.

[00:43:15] **Joce** All right. Thank you, Denise. And that's our show. I'd like to thank Denise Williams for talking with me about THE FASTEST WAY TO FALL, which is out now from Berkley Romance. You can find her at denisewilliamswrites.com and on Instagram (@nicwillwrites). Many thanks to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. This episode was produced by me, Joce, and edited by Kendra Winchester. Our music is by Miki Saito with Isaac Greene. You can find us on Twitter and Instagram (@thereadingwomen). Thank you so much for listening.