

Partners - Roxane Gay & Debbie Millman

Roxane: I was like, "what?!" I don't know what I was thinking. I have no game. Like, I genuinely have no game. But it ended up being just the two of us. It ended up being really lovely.

Debbie: Yeah.

Roxane: Despite my best efforts to impede progress. *(Roxane & Debbie laugh)*

(“Partners Introduction” by Hrishikesh Hirway)

Hrishikesh: Roxane Gay is a bestselling author, whose books include *Hunger* and *Bad Feminist*. Debbie Millman is a design legend, and she's the host of the award winning podcast, *Design Matters*. Roxane and Debbie are a power couple. Each with their own impressive careers that they've built over decades of work. But they only met each other a few years ago. Their story, though, actually starts back in 2014, after Roxane published her book *Bad Feminist*. Here's Debbie.

Debbie: *(Debbie laughs)* The first time I learned of Roxane's existence was because of my ex. *(Debbie laughs)* She sent me an email because she hadn't remembered being so impacted by a book before and it was *Bad Feminist*. And then I got so enamored by the book, I ended up ordering the *Bad Feminist* t-shirt. *(Debbie laughs)* My experience of reading *Bad Feminist* was one of awe at how someone could write about politics and human behavior and I felt like there were just so many things that I could relate to and that we had in common. Just so many overlaps of small, quotidian things that led me to believe, if nothing more, "we could be best friends!"

But I think now, in retrospect, I fell in love with Roxane while reading *Hunger*. I was stunned by the depth of clarity about oneself. I was so moved by *Hunger* that I really wanted to talk to her more about it. So I reached out to Roxane directly and invited her, at that point, to be on my podcast.

Roxane: But, at the time, I was not at all into podcasts so I didn't look it up and I told her to get in touch with my publicist Amanda, who's lovely, and...

Debbie: Amanda never responded. *(Debbie laughs)*

So I waited two or three, four weeks, wrote again, didn't hear back. Wrote again, didn't hear back. And I think on the fourth attempt, I got a bounce back. And it said that Amanda was no longer working at HarperCollins. I then forwarded that entire exchange to Roxane saying, you know, "Looks like Amanda's not there anymore. If you're still willing, I'd love to interview you." At which point, she said,

"Thanks, but no thanks. I'm exhausted from all the media." And at that point I let things, sort of, simmer.

Roxane: And then, a while later, Debbie sent me another email, and she would continue to send some emails where she said incredibly beautiful things about *Hunger* that let me know, like, that she *really* read it. And really, sort of, understood what the book was about, which not everyone who's read it can claim.

Debbie: I think I wrote, like, three times over the course of a year. Like, three or four months in between each email.

I was still trying to get her attention. And so I started to ask people to be on the podcast that I knew Roxane respected, that I'd seen her Tweet about. And so I started to reach out to those people thinking that, maybe, if she saw or heard something about those people through their own social media, that maybe she'd reconsider my invitation.

A whole year later after my original email, I had drinks with Ashley Ford and a whole bunch of other friends, and Ashley was talking about Roxane. And then very, very unconsciously I blurted out, "Oh my God, I have such a crush on her." And then Ashley tilted her head and she was like, "Really." And not, "Really?", like a question it was, "Really", like a statement. (*Roxane laughs*) And that was really the first time I'd uttered it out loud. It was the first moment I acknowledged that this is what I felt. I had been pulled to Roxane like a rip tide.

(*Roxane types*)

Roxane, I hear you typing.

Roxane: No, I'm making notes. (*Roxane and Debbie laugh*)

It's just very romantic. I want to, like, record some of this stuff. (*Debbie laughs*)

Debbie: Because of Ashley's response, I asked if I could write her again saying that Ashley had put in a good word for me and maybe that would pique Roxane's interest.

Roxane: No one has ever pursued me with the ardor that Debbie pursued me with. And when she emailed me, she emailed me to ask me out on a proper date. I was so charmed by that turn-of-phrase, "take you out on a proper date." And nobody had ever, like, offered to take me out on a date. And so it was incredibly intoxicating. And so, I just was like, "Okay, sure."

Debbie: And, really, that's what she said, "Sure." Nothing else.

Roxane: I think I, wait, I might've said, "Well, next time I'm in New York," see, this is why I take notes (*Debbie laughs*), "Next time I'm in New York, sure."

Debbie: I didn't want to say, "Well, when are you going to be in New York?" I just was like, "Okay."

And then, several months later, I wrote and said, "I see you're going to be in New York, why don't I come to the event and then after we can go out for a drink?" And she said, "Sure." (*Debbie laughs*)

I think it was the longest book line I'd ever seen so I just was waiting in the auditorium.

Roxane: Well, I didn't Google her, so I didn't know what she looked like.

Debbie: And then there were stragglers and so I kept telling the stragglers to go ahead of me. And they're like, "No, no, no!" I'm like, "No we're friends. I want to be last."

Finally, finally, finally I was *the* last person. Handed her the book. She looked at me and said, "Are you Debbie?" And I said, "yes."

Roxane: And she was *incredibly* hot. (*Roxane laughs*) And I just felt so, not only was I thrilled, I was also incredibly nervous because I'm shy in real life and very self-conscious. I was like, (*Roxane groans*) "She's a 10. I'm a four. Like, what's going to happen here?" But we ended up going to dinner and the conversation flowed really well. She's a consummate conversationalist. And she was so open about what she wanted. I didn't have to guess. And I've spent most of my adult life having to guess what people think and what they feel. She was just like, "Here's what I feel. Here's why. Here's what I think. And here's what I want." I can't tell you how sexy it was. It was a great, great date. That night, I went back and I just thought, *Wow! this works out, like, my whole life would change.*

Debbie: This was the first time in my life where I wasn't completely frantic (*Debbie laughs*) about where this was going to go. I just had this deep seated sense that we belong together. And I was just going to wait it out. So I was very patient, but present.

Roxane: I started to look up Debbie the day before our second date. She had mentioned that she had recently sold her company. And I was like, "Oh!" I started to see that she was the President Emeritus of AIGA and all of these other incredible accomplishments. I had never been in a relationship with someone who had a public profile similar to mine. It just intrigued me further.

Debbie: Prior to the date, Roxane had written and asked me if she could bring a friend to our dinner, to our second date because her friend was a fan of mine.

Roxane: I wanted to show off this, like, really amazing woman I was going on a date with. *(Roxane laughs)*

Debbie: So on the one hand, I was a little bit disappointed that she didn't want to just have one-on-one time with me. But on the other hand, I was like, "Oh, she's talking to her friends about me! That's a good thing!"

Roxane: I mean, I, now I recognize like, "Oh, what are you doing?" Like, "What kind of game do you have *(Roxane & Debbie laugh)* that you're inviting a friend on a, like..." And we were at a sexy restaurant and everything. I was like, "What?!" I don't know what I was thinking. I have no game. Like, I genuinely have no game.

But it ended up being just the two of us. It ended up being really lovely. Despite my best efforts to impede progress. *(Roxane & Debbie laugh)*

Debbie: Every year I have a holiday party for my graduate students at my house. And the party was well underway, and I had been drinking Prosecco. And ordinarily, whenever I'm having a party, I do, sort of, take a break and lock myself in the bathroom just to, sort of, chill for a bit. And so I took my phone, and I had my Prosecco and I went to the bathroom *(Debbie laughs)* and I called her. And I was like, "I think I love you!" But she had already texted me that she had asked Alexa when it's okay to say, "I love you" to someone. So I kind of knew that she was hinting. *(Debbie laughs)* And so I made it easy for her by saying that that night.

Roxane: One of the things that was a little mysterious about Debbie early in our relationship is that she had just spent this whole year single, deliberately single. Getting to know herself and getting to figure out what she likes and what she wants without having to answer to anyone. And she would not change her plans to see me. And I really respected that.

Debbie: That year of being on my own really changed how I was thinking about who I was, you know, as a person and what I could be worth in the world.

Roxane: And so when she said that, it really solidified like, "Oh wow, she loves herself and respects herself and her commitments, and she also loves me."

Debbie: I think the first thing that we did publicly was when I interviewed Roxane for the On Air Fest in 2019.

(On Air Fest: "Design Matters Live with Roxane Gay and Debbie Millman")

Debbie: They didn't know that we were a couple at that point so,

Roxane: That's true.

Debbie: Then during the interview, I think I said, in the interview, "Well, I think I first fell in love with you when..."

Roxane: Plot twist! *(Debbie laughs)*

Debbie: And it was clear, at that point, that we were in a relationship, and you could hear, like, the audience gasp!

Roxane: Yeah. There was, like an audible gasp. It was hilarious.

Debbie: It was a wonderful, wonderful moment.

Roxane: And finally she gets this interview she wanted. I hope that it meets her expectations because Lord knows she worked for it. *(Roxane and Debbie laugh)*

(On Air Fest: "Design Matters Live with Roxane Gay and Debbie Millman")

Roxane: I listen to Debbie's podcast now. It's very good. I frankly think she's the best interviewer in the country right now. She's brilliant. Debbie reads pretty much everything before I send it off to my editor. She's not afraid to tell me what works and what doesn't work, which is rare. Even though I'll, like, get in my feelings about it, I do hear the feedback and then I apply it. I really do delight in everything about her. I feel like we know each other well, but living together has opened up a whole new room...

Debbie: Yes.

Roxane: That I didn't know was in the house of love. Because I'm like, "Wow!"

Debbie: Yeah, no. I love living with Roxane and we're also best friends so that makes for, I think, a really wonderful existence.

Roxane: We had a beautiful wedding planned and it was going to be a huge wedding.

Debbie: Gloria Steinem was going to marry us.

Roxane: But, when COVID happened, we began to realize that we were not going to be able to have a 400 person gathering. And also I came of age, as a queer person, at a time when marriage was not legal for us. And when your partner got sick, you had no legal recourse. I started to have a lot of anxiety about, what if

something happens to one of us and we can't be there for each other because we're not legally married, and whatever. And then, I thought, *it would be super romantic to just elope.*

I turned to Debbie and I said, "Hey, how would you feel about getting married today?"

And...

Debbie: *(Debbie laughs)* True story.

Roxane: She said, "Okay."

Debbie: No. I said, "Sure."

Roxane: She said, "Sure." *(Roxane laughs sarcastically)* And so we went to instantmarriagela.com and it's in an office park in Encino. And we went into this little room and we got married beneath a plastic chuppah. And it was really romantic in its own way.

Debbie: Being with Roxane has definitely changed how I see myself. I've been on a journey of trying to understand who I am for a really long time in therapy. And so I think the two paths, being with Roxane, and also being on this long journey of trying to understand myself, have intersected in a really good way. 'Cause I trust Roxane so much that I try to believe her point of view about me in a way that I might not have in the past and that does impact my self-esteem.

Roxane: You know, I struggle with self-acceptance quite a lot, and I've of course written about it. And I will say that someone who accepts you, it makes self-acceptance, which is something I never thought was possible, it makes it seem plausible. I may not be there yet, but because this person deems me, sort of, like, worthy, helps. It puts it on the table.

Debbie: I recently met Amanda and I didn't know that she was the publicist that had been, sort of, the go-between. And so when Roxane introduced us, and then alerted me to her part in our origin story, I was like, "Oh my God, you're the woman that never responded!" *(Debbie laughs)* Which was good 'cause had Roxane been on the podcast at that point, I actually don't know that things would have, sort of, unfurled in the way that they did. I wasn't ready at the time and I don't know that she was either. So when it happened, it was right for both of us.

("Partners Introduction" by Hrishikesh Hirway)

Hrishikesh: Roxane Gay and Debbie Millman are partners. There are over 400 episodes of Debbie's podcast, *Design Matters*. And Roxane has a podcast of her own now, called *Here to Slay*. Roxane and Debbie are planning a second wedding. And this one actually will be officiated by Gloria Steinem.

Partners is made by me, Hrishikesh Hirway. I've produced, edited, and made the music for the show. Maureen Hoban is my co-producer. Zack McNess helped edit this episode. And Chloe Parker and Casey Deal are the production assistants. *Partners* is a Mailchimp podcast, made in partnership with Radiotopia. Find out more at mailchimp.com/presents and at radiotopia.fm. Thanks for listening.