



Rants and Randomness with Luvvie Ajayi

Blow Them Away (with Courtney A. Kemp) - Episode 40

Released: March 31, 2020

My peoples! Welcome to Rants and Randomness. I'm Luvvie, your side-eye sorceress and typically, I bring you things I'm loving, things I'm side-eyeing and something that makes me feel good, but sometimes I do a special episode when an interview is so good, it needs to stand on its own. And that's what we have here. On this episode, I'm talking to Courtney A. Kemp, co-creator and show runner of the hit Starz TV show Power.

She's a force to be reckoned with and an influential black woman in Hollywood getting things done. She dropped so many gems that this interview needs to stand alone. She talked about growing up as the only black woman in her city. She talked about why imposter syndrome doesn't psych her out in how she handles the challenges thrown at her.

There are times in the interview when I wanted to jump out of my chair and run around because she was just preaching. Courtney is a straight shooter who knows her shit and she's not shy about it, and I love everything about her. I know you're going to really enjoy this episode because I loved listening to it.

So, also check out other standalone interviews that I've done on this podcast. . [Rich Dennis \(Episode 20\)](#), [Yvette Noel Shure \(Episode 23\)](#), and [Thasunda Brown Duckett \(Episode 29\)](#). My standalone interviews feel like masterclasses and I'm thankful to everybody who joins me on this show. Courtney, thank you for joining me.

Rants and Randomness Sponsor

[00:01:18]

The first, let me drop this new hot podcast on you. Shout out to this episode sponsor, [The Suga](#). It's a new podcast you should check out. It's a show from modern women of color and it's hosted by chocolate goddess Tika Sumpter. You might know her as a model or from the hit show Mixed Dish, or one of her other movie roles.

Her cohost is Thai Randolph, who is in the award winning business exec, and is one of the head of Kevin Hart's LOL network. Every week, Tika and Thai invite a woman of color to talk about the unique perspective on motherhood, love, friendship, and everything in between. The Suga is made for, and by the modern Brown mama. They wanted to make sure there was a safe space for all women, moms, moms to be in those undecided, to laugh, learn, and loving each other as they navigate life.

You can listen to The Suga now in your favorite podcast app and make sure to subscribe and favorite search for The Suga. That's S U G A. Now onto my interview with Courtney.

Interview with Courtney A. Kemp

[00:02:23]

LUVVIE All right. Hey, Courtney!

COURTNEY Hi! How are you?

LUVVIE I'm good. How are you doing?

COURTNEY I'm good. Just trying to figure out if I'm going to go to New York tomorrow.

LUVVIE Oh my gosh! Girl, I can't.

COURTNEY This is crazy, man.

LUVVIE This is nuts. Nuts. But thank you for making time.

COURTNEY Of course. Are you kidding me? I'm a huge fan. Huge fan.

LUVVIE Oh, man. This is exciting. This is exciting. Mark, does she sound good? We're all good? All right. So I'm continuing with the roster of amazing women during Women's History Month. And we have a powerhouse Black woman making history in entertainment on the show today. Courtney A. Kemp. Courtney, thank you so much for coming on the show.

COURTNEY Oh, my goodness. Thank you so much for having me, so much.

LUVVIE Don't give people your bio, because your epic-ness is real. Courtney A. Kemp is a television writer and producer. In 2014, she created the Starz series, *Power*, which just has a series finale and is the most-watched original series on Starz with millions of viewers. And has several spin-offs shows in production right now, like five. She was also a writer on shows like *The Bernie Mac Show*, *The Good Wife*, and *Beauty and the Beast*. Courtney is one of the most powerful women in television, and I am excited to have her on *Rants & Randomness*. Courtney, thank you for coming on.

COURTNEY It's my pleasure, and I'm really excited, to be honest with you. I'm super excited to do this.

LUVVIE So I always start by asking my guests what do you want to do or be when you were growing up?

COURTNEY I'd been writing and making up stories since I was a very little girl, I'd probably say like four or five. I really started playing... Yeah, definitely. I've always been a storyteller. My mom laughs about it, and I see it now in my own daughter. We have a lot of fun making up stories. But I

started that back then. And then was I was in high school, I started reading, James Baldwin. And I thought, Oh I really want to be a novelist. And my dad said, "No, you're going to be a lawyer instead." And I said, "Okay." I really like the law as it is on TV, but when I went to college I just stayed with my love of words. I went to college for English Lit and Modern Culture and Media Studies, which at Brown was like the study of film. And it's really funny because I never took the production classes at Brown. I was like, I'm never going to make a movie. I'm never going to make TV. I just want to talk about it.

And then all these years later here I am with like so much TV I'm making I could hardly handle it.

LUVVIE Again, there are several queens of television, you're definitely one of them.

COURTNEY Well, thank you.

LUVVIE Do you find any old stories you used to write like when you were young?

COURTNEY I do. I do find them. They're all very sad. It's really interesting. Everything I wrote in high school was really sad and had sad endings. In middle school, I won a state prize for an article I wrote about being the only black person or one of the few black people in my high school. But I won an award in middle school for a story I wrote about a nuclear holocaust. And the end of that story is the last pieces of nuclear winter fall on the last plant, and it's like the last thing that dies for the group of people that have been hiding underground. It's really sad stuff. And I guess it's funny because when we killed Raina on the show - spoiler alert, for anyone who doesn't watch Power, but when we killed Raina a lot of people said, "God that's so sad." And I was like, "Really?" Feels like what would happen to me. So I do have a history of writing stuff that doesn't have happy endings. Sorry, everybody.

LUVVIE So wait, how were you as a kid when you were writing these stories? What was your personality like?

COURTNEY I was always loud. I'm a Kemp, we're all loud and very boisterous and funny. But I was also pretty introspective. I think anytime you grow up and there aren't a lot of people who look like you around you, you do feel different. So I felt different. And that was something that I really couldn't share with a lot of people because they weren't like me and they didn't understand. And I didn't really fit in groups of People of Color at that age either, because I didn't have any of their cultural references. I was kind of on an island by myself. That's a great question, what was I like? I was a musician. I was working very hard on singing and on piano and on clarinet. I was writing a lot. I was getting straight As. I was doing a lot of musicals. I was reading a lot of theater, reading a lot of plays. I was reading a lot. I think that's the best answer is I was reading a lot.

But I had friends and all those things, but I had like the theater kid. But I wasn't a cheerleader. I wasn't on a sports team. I wasn't having that experience. I wasn't having like the typical Connecticut high school experience.

LUVVIE Connecticut, what city?

COURTNEY It's called Westport. Now, it's a little bit more diverse, but at that time in the 80s, we're talking Reagan era, definitely not such a diverse place to be. And everyone was a Republican. I remember I went to school with Mondale / Ferraro button on my jean jacket. And I got mocked. I had two big Afro puffs at that time, and all the kids called me Minnie Mouse. It's fine now. I look back on it and I laugh. But I definitely remember that differentness, that separateness and how I really couldn't wait to find people who were like me when I got out.

LUVVIE How did your parents handle that basically being on your own island?

COURTNEY Well, it was their call. My dad, when he was a younger man, all the executives where he worked, he worked at General Foods. And then he worked at various advertising agencies. All the executives lived outside New York City. They lived in Westport and Fairfield and all those towns, and New Rochelle and Scarsdale. And so that was his goal. He was like, I'm just as good as these white guys. I'm going to have a house up there. I'm going to raise my family out there just like they do, which I understand. That was where he was coming from. And then I guess he moved us out there thinking, "Okay you're going to get this great education and you're going to have all the advantages that white kids do". But we weren't white kids, so there were some losses. There were some gains and losses. I think my mom tried to like stitch it together with Jake and Jill a little bit. But I think my dad was much more like, Look you're getting this advantage.

And because he grew up with all black people, as in my mom, my mom grew up in segregation, I really think that my dad felt like, Oh you'll get over it. Like blackness is not something that you learn, it's something that you are. Well, that is true to some extent, but I think as I grew older I really felt selected into an African-American identity. Not everybody does that, though. That was like a choice. But I was always yearning for more people like myself. One of the things that I'm always sad about is that with other black women my age, I didn't grow up braiding hair. I didn't grow up doing other people's hair. I didn't grow up with all of that. I missed certain things. And I always laugh at people and I say, "I wasn't really black until 1994," because I graduated high school. And then when I went to college, that's when I found people. But I had to leave my home town to do it.

LUVVIE How did you pick Brown? What made you pick that as your undergrad?

COURTNEY My dad said, "I will pay for any Ivy League school. So you can apply to these eight schools." [crosstalk 00:08:07]. So I wanted to go to Sarah Lawrence or Bard or someplace that was about writing. And my dad was like, "Nope. You're not going to any of these silly little liberal arts schools to get a degree in nothing." So when I looked at all those Ivy League schools, Brown was the one that had a creative writing program. They were very much like, Hey don't worry about a core curriculum. You don't have to take math. Whatever. You don't have to do that. So it was kind of perfect for me. And when I visited the campus, I fell in love with it. And it wasn't that far from home too. There were a lot of advantages to that. It was only like three hours from home. Not that I wanted to be close to them, but they wanted me to be close to them. At first when they said that I was like, Which one is furthest away?

LUVVIE You're like, How far can I run?

COURTNEY I was like, Is Cornell far enough? Like, Who is far enough? So kind of a funny story in that way. But that's why I picked Brown for sure.

LUVVIE College for me was life-changing in that it kind of changed the way I looked at the world. What did you think you learned the most in college?

COURTNEY Oh God, I learned so many things. I wish I could talk to my college-aged self, though.

LUVVIE What would you say?

COURTNEY I really wish I could. I would say, Girl, your eating disorder is troubling. Let us get us some help for that now-ish. I would say, Having a man is not the most important thing. You don't need that, not right now. You're in your early twenties, go live. Go to France. I didn't go to my exchange program. I was fluent in French at the time. I barely use it now. But I was fluent in French at the time. I really wanted to go to France on this student exchange my Junior year, and my boyfriend at the time was like, "Well, I'm not going to wait for you, so if you go we have to break up." And so I didn't go. I wish I could slap old self upside the head and be like, "Bitch, get on that plane."

LUVVIE Get on the plane!

COURTNEY Get on the plane. But of course, we don't know these things when we're teenagers. I guess the most important thing I learned is that education changes class, that you become middle class through your education no matter what. My friends who came from a less affluent background, they would talk to me all the time about how going home changed for them, because they had seen a new kind of the world, part of the world. Not Rhode Island but through books, through education, through being around people who had a different experience in life.

LUVVIE Man. So let's dig into that. How did you end up having an eating disorder? What happened that basically was the catalyst for that?

COURTNEY It's a great question. And it's something that's not talked about in our community at all. There's so many things around mental health and depression, anxiety that people do not talk about in our community. And I find it to be like, this is how we die. How we die as a community is because we don't talk about these things. Once we don't talk about them, we don't talk about mental health, we don't talk about addiction, we don't talk about any of that stuff, and so then people sink deeper and deeper into it. And there's such a stigma against therapy, against talking to anybody but your preacher about things that it really becomes something that that's how people get hurt. They use sex, or they use alcohol, or they use drugs, or they use other things to cope with those feelings. If they address those feelings, potentially they wouldn't have to use those things. And I do feel like it's one of the great sorrows of our community that we're not allowed to talk about, "Hey I think I have problems. I think I have trauma. I think I need help."

But the eating disorder thing just comes from, again, I was raised in perfection. I was raised in like straight As are the only way. Again, I was isolated because of my race. I looked different. And it's not uncommon for young women to become anorexic based on wanting to disappear, wanting to not be seen. I was so highly visible I couldn't hide anything.

LUVVIE There was no hiding.

COURTNEY So there was this kind of thing, and I think it's not uncommon with women of color. It's just that we don't talk about it.

LUVVIE Part of the whole not hiding thing, besides the fact that you're black, you're also not 5' 2" and 100 pounds.

COURTNEY 100%.

LUVVIE And the 80s and the 90s, this was not the time when people celebrated you being different or anything besides what is considered the standard of beauty. So how did you-

COURTNEY Not at all. And I had that profound moment too of like the first black Miss America, and then they took away her title. You remember?

LUVVIE Oh, yes!

COURTNEY It was like that little moment of like, Oh look at us for five seconds. And then they took it away. Or there were moments of my childhood where seeing people who looked like me on television like, Oh look, there's Flo Jo. There's Jackie Joyner-Kersey. Like there were moments, moments where we would pop up. I know you're younger than I am, but it's not like it is now for my daughter. Or even, not even my daughter, because my daughter's nine. But girls who are in their 20s now, they have seen so many different kinds of us and shapes of us. If I had had a Marla [inaudible 00:13:44] when I was 16 I would have felt totally different about what I look like at the time. But no, I'm not a little person. I'm not a quiet person ultimately. So it was hard for me to hide anyway.

LUVVIE You take up space, and we're supposed to take up space. But again, this is a new concept. The permission to take up space is new. How did that affect your college experience as you're going through this?

COURTNEY I was pretty arrogant about my intelligence at that time. So I'm sorry to those of you who went to college with me. If I felt the need to tell you about yourself and how wrong you were in sociology class, probably that was me. I was the person who when a person who was, I used the phrase non-Black, a person who was non-Black made a comment about people of color, I was like, "No, you're wrong. Let me explain to you why you don't know what you're talking about." I was that guy a little bit. That was part of identity politics at that time. I went to college in like the mid to late '90s. Identity politics was all about that. It was so deep, not only identity politics around race but around gender, around sexuality. All of that stuff was coming to the fore at that time. So I think I was pretty stringent, pretty political for sure. I was definitely more of a Freddy when I wasn't Denise.

LUVVIE Come on Different World.

COURTNEY Yes, exactly. I think that probably describes me. It's funny that we're talking about this because it's not what I thought you were going to talk about. But what were you like?

LUVVIE Oh my God. In college kind of similar. College was when I actually started blogging, so I probably thought my life was way more interesting than it was. I would blog about like undergrad life, and I would write about whatever exams I wasn't studying for. I took myself very seriously, but I was goofy. It was my first time being by myself too. So I kind of discovered who I was without parental supervision. But funny enough who I am without parental supervision was very close to who I was with parental supervision. I was still very like, I got to make sure I'm going to class. I got to make sure I'm not failing out of college. I've got to make sure that I'm being responsible. But my major was in psychology. And yours was what, English Lit?

COURTNEY Yeah, English and American Literature.

LUVVIE See, I was like, I'm supposed to be a doctor because you know Nigerian Girl, that didn't happen. But I think I was still convicted to like not do something that was Liberal Arts. So what made you, what gave you the confidence?

COURTNEY Well, I was going to say my ex-husband his dad is from Ghana, and so I was kind of in that whole world for a long time, because we were together for 20 years. And that pressure on the kids of West African immigrants to be perfect, to succeed it's like as bad if not worse than what I was going through. So I can't even imagine. I can't even imagine being a girl in that situation. My ex-husband is a man and it was so hard. I just watched that, and I was like, Wow. And he's an attorney. He did all the things he was supposed to do, checkmarks, checkmarks, checkmarks. He played college football, he did all the things. But it's interesting, you do all the things that you're supposed to do because it's ingrained in you. So it's like my dad has been deceased now since 2011. I still basically am trying to get an A so I can please him when it comes right down to it. In like the basics of my DNA, I'm still trying to say, Daddy are you proud of me yet? It's fundamental.

Shout out to this episode sponsor, [The Suga](#). It's a new podcast you should check out, and it's about modern Women of Color for modern Women of Color. It's hosted by Tika Sumpter, and you might know her as a model or from the hit show Mixed Dish, or one of her other movie roles. Her cohost is Thai Randolph, who is an award winning business executive, and every week Tika and Thai invite a woman of color to talk about their unique perspective on motherhood, love, friendship, and everything in between.

[The Suga](#) made for and by the modern Brown mama, they wanted to make a safe space for all women - moms, moms to be in those undecided, to laugh, learn, and love on each other as they navigate life. So listen to the sugar on your favorite podcast app and make sure to subscribe and favorite it. Search for [The Suga](#), that's S-U-G-A.

LUVVIE So you graduated with English Lit as your major?

COURTNEY Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

LUVVIE What did you do next?

COURTNEY I went to Columbia University in the PhD program for English Lit. And then I got a Master's there and left because it was too isolated. I like people too much to be like in a Carol writing a book about... I was doing my work in Jane Austen at that time. I refused to do African American Literature because it was like everywhere I went, and again this is 1998 into 1999, so it's the height of identity politics. Anywhere I went people were like, Oh you're in English Literature. Are you doing African American Lit? And I'm like, "No, I'm not. I'm not doing African American Lit, because I look like this that doesn't mean that is what I'm doing." I read African American Lit.

I remember once I had this... My advisor because I was doing the 1800s because I was doing that time period, the advisor they gave me was a guy who had done all that work. And he was like, "You just don't seem like someone who wants to do this work." And I was like, "I know I don't seem like that, but why?" And he was like, "Well, I'm just saying it just seems like you would be more into African American Lit." Like he said it, he really said it. He just actually said it. And he wasn't the first person. So this has been building up, and I said to him, "I lived African American Literature. I don't need to read it." And he was like... And of course, I was reading African American Lit, but that's what I was doing to feed my soul not to do my work. And so then my work on Jane Austen. I wrote my-

LUVVIE That's what I was doing to feed my soul, not to do my work.

COURTNEY Yeah, I had a big mouth for a while. Yeah, I have a big mouth always.

LUVVIE I don't think there's anything wrong with it.

COURTNEY Hold on, I have to... Sorry. Okay. I can't just tell people to leave me alone. So there's like two shows shooting right now. Ghost is shooting right now in New York, and Raising Kanan is shooting right now in New York. So I'm getting these consistent text messages about what's happening on set. And like crises after crises are like popping off. And always tell people, "I'm not available for this period of time." But nobody cares. I'm just stressed about that.

LUVVIE No, this is also valid, because how did you go from writing about Jane Austen to where you are now? I want to know that journey because it's so fascinating to me that you went from doing that to doing this.

COURTNEY Well, it's funny because first of all, the answer to a lot of your questions is God. That's really how it happened because I was aiming in a totally different direction. So I was setting out to be the first black Editor in Chief of Vogue. That's really what I wanted. I love fashion, I love style, I love beauty, I love skin, I love hair, I love all that. That was what I really wanted to do. And I was very thin if you remember, anorexia. That's where I was going, so I left Glenview with my Master's degree and went to Conde Nast and worked at Mademoiselle, and I worked at GQ after that. And I was really trying to get my way into Vogue. And when I was at GQ, I wrote an article about interracial dating for the magazine. And it was funny because I really had dated mostly white guys obviously considering where I was until I met my ex-husband. Mostly, not entirely. But until I met my ex-husband and then we were just together and got married.

And so I'd written this kind of funny, tongue in cheek piece about don't take your... it was written to white men about dating black women. I was like, "Don't take her out for fried

chicken." Blasé blah. Ha, ha, ha. That went out in the September 2001 issue of GQ, which means nobody read it. Because the world exploded in September 2001.

So I thought that nobody read it, but it turns out these two writers named Chris Alberghini and Mike Chessler, who I'm still friends with, they had read it. And he wanted to turn my little story into a TV show. And that didn't actually happen, but we ended up creating a show and then going to pitch it at HBO. And HBO didn't buy it, but I learned this is what I want to do. So I always wanted to write, I always wanted to be a novelist, all these things. But I really didn't realize that that's what it was.

And I think this is true of every successful person. I know it's true of you. There was a moment then where I had to leap and walk out on faith. So I moved to California. And I have to give my ex-husband a lot of credit here. He was like, "Well if this is what you're going to do, we can't stay here. You can't stay in New York." Now, you can live in New York and be a television writer and it's harder. Then, it was impossible, so we had to move to LA. And so I moved out here. I didn't know how to drive really. It all had to happen then basically. And so I moved. I started working for a travel agent. I had an agent when I moved out here because of the article. I had an agent, her name is Nancy Epps. She's still my agent, although technically I had to fire her a few months ago. We can talk about that separately because of the Writer's Guild. And I don't know if your listeners know about the Writer's Guild and my Union-

LUVVIE No, they don't. We haven't talked about that.

COURTNEY So it's just that the Writer's Guild of America, our leadership a while ago decided that we had to fire our agents because of the way that they make money off of us as writers. So we had to do all that. But Nancy really believed in me and she said, "Look, you're going to get a job out here," to move out here. And I did. That was June 16th, 2004 when I moved out. And in August I started working on The Bernie Mac Show as a staff writer. It was very lucky. And I will tell you I wrote a spec for Bernie Mac and they hired me off of that. And I'm going to tell you that never happens, but that was God. That is God. Here is the thing because that whole thing about you have to do the footwork, but then God will make sure that your feet land where they're supposed to be. And so I moved. If I hadn't moved, then the story would be very different. But I moved. And so God was like, Okay I'll meet you more than halfway. And that happened.

And I will also just say for the listener, I worked the first year of Bernie Mac, and then I got fired because I wasn't funny. Straight up.

LUVVIE Let's talk about that. Word?

COURTNEY Straight up wasn't funny. How about that? And there were other things that happened too. And I just told you, Kemp, for the most part, we're very loud and we're very funny. I was like, I got this. No, I do not got it. I didn't know how to navigate the politics, I didn't know how to be in the world. I just didn't know how to do all those things. I didn't have the emotional maturity. I was still so like a child in a lot of ways and didn't know how to do it. I was so used to being the person that put her hand up first. I just didn't know how to sit quietly and learn. And I didn't know how to get along. I really wish I could hug that version of me, 26, 27-year-old me. I'd really

like to give her a hug and just say, Oh girl, you're going to figure this out, but it's going to take some time.

LUVVIE You remember what they told you when they fired you?

COURTNEY Well, they don't fire you directly. They tell your agent and they say they're not asking you back. But I remember that phone call. I remember where I was sitting. And I remember being like, "Okay. Well, I don't want to fucking work for them anyway." I had a little bit of an attitude, but then also it was my first big failure in life because I was so proud. I was working on a show that my parents actually liked. I was making like \$120,000 a year, that was a huge, huge amount of money, a huge step from where I had been. My dad had bet against me what I moved out there. He said, "Well, don't move out there because you'll be back in a year." And I moved. But that was the thing, he wanted me to be a lawyer. What the fuck is this moving to California to be a TV writer. What was that about?

LUVVIE Which is pipe dreams.

COURTNEY You understand me.

LUVVIE Which is pipe dreams for real.

COURTNEY Yeah. And he's like, "You're a Black woman. No one's going to let you do that." And he's right, people didn't let me do it. I had to like kick doors down and punch my way through. But he was a pioneer in his own way, and I think that was actually very inspiring to me. But to go back, I had written... Coming off of that, Nancy said to me, "Well, do you really want to write comedy? Is that really what you want to do." And I said, "No, I don't even watch comedy," because I didn't. I watch *Law and Order* and those kinds of things. I watched hit dramas. And she said, "Well, okay. Write a drama spec." And I wrote a *CSI*, and that got me hired on a show called, *In Justice*, which is the first show that Robert and Michelle King created for ABC. And Robert and Michelle went on to create, *The Good Wife*, and I worked for them for three years on that later.

But after that, after leaving comedy to go to drama, I worked every year consistently from then until now on TV. I never had a year where I sat out. I was always working, and I was very fortunate. The show got canceled and we had a strike, but I always worked because I finally got it. I was in the right place doing the right thing at the right time. And I was a two for a lot. Back in the day in that time, they would hire all their white, straight men first, and then they would go, We need a woman or we need a Person of Color. And sometimes, Luvvie, I got the job because I was both.

LUVVIE Say more.

COURTNEY And then... What?

LUVVIE You say you got the job because you were broke or booked.

COURTNEY Both, both meaning they needed someone who was of color or they needed a woman. Basically, there were nine seats in the room, they would hire eight straight white guys and then they

would go, Oh we need a woman. Or we need a Person of Color. Not because they wanted to but because they needed to look diverse to the studio. And so what would happen is they would meet me and they'd go, Great, if we hire her we don't have to try to hire an additional one.

LUVVIE You're a twofer.

COURTNEY I'm a twofer, exactly. I was twofer.

LUVVIE So what was your approach when you end up on these sets even if you knew that they hired you for that reason?

COURTNEY Oh, that doesn't matter. It's so funny when I hear young people, millennials, they're like, "I can't believe he just said that to me. He just said he hired me because I'm a woman. So the fuck what? Go in and do what you do. Who cares why the door opened? I don't care why the door opened. The door opened. I'm walking through it. I don't care. People's shit is so misplaced to me. Can I curse?

LUVVIE You can, you can. It's fine.

COURTNEY People's concern about why they're in the room boggles my mind. I don't care why I'm in the room. I'm in the room, I'm in the room.

LUVVIE I love that because a lot of people the imposter syndrome of like, Oh my god, do I belong here? So they make in effect what they do and how they show up. You're saying it doesn't even matter whether or not you think you belong there, just get the job done.

COURTNEY Correct. Correct. Correct.

LUVVIE Like that. That is a new perspective I've not heard from a lot of people. Wow.

COURTNEY Yeah. The imposter syndrome thing for me that's never been a thing for me. I have it sometimes, of course, personally, I have that. But when it comes to corporate structure, when it comes to traditional powers that be who have been in power for a long time, when it comes to them looking at me, I don't have imposter syndrome. I know I'm being underestimated, and I've had Dre say this on *Power*. And I think I had Ghost maybe say it to him at one point. But being underestimated is the best thing that can ever happen to you in business. It's the best thing. You want people to look at you and go, Oh she can't do that. You want that.

LUVVIE And why?

COURTNEY Because then you blow them away with your excellence and they're surprised and you have the element of surprise. You get to shock people and just to prove them wrong. You always want people to go on record saying you can't do something. Go on record! Do it! Please! Yes! Say she can't do that. Fabulous! Because then when I prove you wrong, not only do I look like a star, but you look like a fool. And I didn't have to do anything to you.

LUVVIE Girl, that's a preach! That is a preach! I love that! I love that because we're constantly stuck in this hole, people don't expect a lot from me. Let them not expect nothing from you, and then blow them out the water.

COURTNEY Invite them to. Invite them to all day long. Invite them to think that you're less than. I had a conversation with... It was so funny. I was doing the show called, *Get Christie Love!*, which didn't end up being picked up by ABC but it was a great experience. I was on a phone call and a person on the call said, and I'm not going to name names, but the person on the call said, "Well, this network..." We were talking to a whole bunch of different networks. "This network will never do this for you because they've never done it before." And I said, "That has nothing to do with anything. That is not at all relevant. I have never been relevant. And so we were talking about *Power* never would have done the numbers it's done for Starz. So I am not precedential. And when you talk about me and when you think about me, don't think about precedent. Think about how far we can go, not how low it has been in the past."

And that woman of course who was on that call I don't know that she loved that I said that, but she turned out to be wrong. And people have a tendency to turn out to be wrong. But I don't like to call them on it. I like to say in my best and highest self when I'm closest to my higher power, what I say to people is, "Okay, maybe you're right." And I just let them be them.

LUVVIE Wow, and then you do your job. And then you kill it. You kill it.

COURTNEY You try. You try..

LUVVIE So when *Power* started in 2014, first of all, where did you get the idea of *Power*? How did the whole *Power* thing happen? Because that show me and my husband sit there binge-watching it on some like we are dedicating the day to watching episodes to catching up if we weren't. *Power* became a powerhouse on TV. How did that whole thing happen?

COURTNEY Again, the answer is God because I'm not in the results business. So you work as hard as you can, leave it out all over the field, whatever people can do. Whatever people do with that, they do with that. You can't make people watch your television show. This is what I say to young people all the time. "Even if you get it on the air, people still have to turn it on." And there's so much content now that people have to choose you.

What I will tell you though, Luvvie is that we came on at a very specific time where there weren't a lot of shows with people like us in the lead. And it was before this whole revolution, because it was *Oz*, we came on. And then *Empire* came on about six months later or maybe 4 months later. And so that was the beginning of all of this. People started to watch it. It just grew from their word of mouth. That's how the juggernaut happened. I personally cannot take credit for all the people that watched.

What I say is I did have to fight my network on certain things, certain kinds of storytelling. I was like, "I'm going to be authentic to the experience of People of Color. I'm going to be authentic to New York." So it's going to be intensely diverse. Not just black or Latin but also Asian. We did different kinds and everything. In terms of white people we had diversity, because we did Albanians, we did Serbians. We were doing what was happening in New York at the time

literally, not somebody's idea of what New York is. And I think that very much helped us. Very early on, I decided that the Spanish would be specific. So for the most part, I would cast Puerto Rican actors as Puerto Rican, Dominican actors as Dominican, Cuban actors as Cuban. For the most part, I did that. And then we had Spanish dialect coaches who really made the dialect-specific to where people were from, not this bullshit Columbian actor playing a Mexican with no change in accent. That's not real.

And I think because we were able to do those things very early and because I was trying to innovate, I was trying to say, Let's make this as close to what it should be as it is.

LUVVIE What made you want to tell that particular story of Ghost, Tommy, and all their doings?

COURTNEY Well, first of all, I was writing about my dad. This story is out there, but I was writing about my father's obsession with image because he was in advertising. So he was always advertising himself. And he always said to us, "If you smell good and you look good and you sound good, white people will give you your shot." And so that's where he was coming from. He was born in 1941, and so that's where he was coming from. That closet of Ghost that you see in the opening, that was my dad's closet growing up. He had this long closet with all these suits. He had these beautiful suits, like suit after suit, shirt after shirt, pocket square after pocket square. He had all these clothes, and he was always transforming himself. He kept himself in good shape. He was always transforming himself to be the most perfect iteration of himself. And I think that was part of it.

He had just died in March of that year. He died March 5th, 2011, and so I was writing about him. And then I took him plus 50. So I took 50's story of having been a drug dealer and having come out on the other side. And in 50's specific case, it's interesting... My dad went to Amos Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth, and he was the first black man to graduate from there. 50, if you get to talk to him, is basically a Fortune 500 CEO really in his brain. And if 50 had been born and raised where I was born and raised, he would have gone to Wharton Business School. I went to Columbia for Graduate school. Like he would be this titan of industry. And he is in his own way, but I think this is the thing about people having opportunity.

This is the other reason that I don't have the imposter syndrome when we're talking about the larger, more traditional, more conventional, more mainstream people who have been in charge is that I went to the same schools they did. And I got the same As they did. So I'm not intimidated. I'm like, Yeah? And?

LUVVIE You're like, I have the pedigree-

COURTNEY So what? I also know about [crosstalk 00:37:49].

LUVVIE And the credentials.

COURTNEY Right. I know Buffy and Muffy. I went to their summer house too. Ha, ha. Let's move on. I think when you look at someone like 50 who doesn't have that educational background, but is so smart and so strategic, that I think it's kind of like my dad is a blend of those both because he grew up kind of in the hood, but also was brilliant and got himself all the way to the Ivy League

from that. And I think that I guess I wanted to blend those two things. That's where the story really comes from. It comes from breaking good. I always used to say, "It's breaking good." They had *Breaking Bad* on TV for a while, but I was like, "What is the other version?" And then to tell you the truth, I really wanted to write about... Ghost's original iteration he was an alcoholic in recovery. He was in a 12-step program that I was told the audience wouldn't find that relatable. So we took the very specifics of that out of the show. But Ghost's struggle with alcohol is still pretty present in the show if you remember?

LUVVIE He's drinking.

COURTNEY [crosstalk 00:38:51] mess up a lot of times with alcohol.

LUVVIE Like he'll get drunk and say something crazy, do something crazy, act a fool. Wow. See I actually hadn't heard that story of how Ghost came to be that character, and then Tommy. You created this TV show that I'm pretty sure your audience was mad diverse too, which is also in itself a gift. A lot of times TV shows are marketed as this is a Black show, this is a white show, this a show for these people. As the show's gone along, did you receive any other type of pushback that you had to fight or were you given creative control, full creative control?

COURTNEY There's no such thing as full creative control in television. And anyone who tells you they have full creative control is lying unless they have a YouTube channel.

LUVVIE Good to know.

COURTNEY There were always pieces of the process that I got pushed back on. The show did not start out with an incredibly diverse audience. It started out with a black audience because they decided to put the original poster was Omari holding a gun. And it said, "From Executive Producer 50 Cent." I've always said this that I am so happy that they put, "From Executive Producer Curtis 50 Cent Jackson," on the poster. I just wish they had foregrounded the shoot more, because what they did was they were like, Yo hip hop audience, this is for you. And I had a white friend of mine, a white male friend of mine say, "I'm not going to watch that show, not from that poster. Why would I watch it? It's not for me." And the show was about the American dream. And this is something I say to young writers all the time, "If your show is not about a universal question, you have the wrong show.

So the universal question in *Power* is, Does my past dictate my future? Which is a big part of the American dream which is, Can I transform? That what we're all about here in American, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We can change. You think about how it started is that one of our fundamental texts has the word happiness in it. That's how silly we are that we are like we think we have the right to be happy. But happiness sometimes has to do with pre-creation, self-image. We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal. I write as I have slaves. I write this as I have slaves. So what does that mean? That means I am creating in myself an image of a perfect statesman, but I'm ignoring the fact that I actually not this at all.

LUVVIE That's a word.

COURTNEY Sorry to get deep.

LUVVIE No, please get deep. You're basically giving a master class right now. Continue.

COURTNEY So my point is the question of your series always as to be universal. Does my past dictate my future? That is a question that everyone can ask themselves, black, white, Asian, Native, no matter what. If you are a Native American woman who lives on the res and you have figured out some way to get yourself into a great school and you've moved away from home, home is still in you. But maybe you want to transform and be something that you can bring back and help other people. That's still, Does my past dictate my future? Those things are all in there.

COURTNEY And so at the first Starz was like, Let's get the low hanging fruit. This is what my former boss Chris Albrecht I protested. I said, "Why is this poster this poster? Why is it this? Why are you not marketing this show more widely? Why is this show not being brought to the attention of people who are non-black?" And he said to me, "Let's get the low hanging fruit first. Let's get the people we know are going to watch the show first." And I still disagree with that fundamentally, emotionally I felt that that was such a rejection of the quality of the program that I was putting forward. But I also understand that from his perspective he was like, I need to grow this audience. And there is another piece of it, and 50 always says this too. Black people define cool.

LUVVIE We do.

COURTNEY We find something and we say this is cool, and then other people do it.

LUVVIE That's true. This is facts, actual factual. But did you ever feel-

COURTNEY It was an actual factual.

LUVVIE Did you ever feel a way about - there are times that people forget that there's actually a showrunner behind this? 50 is an Executive Producer. There are times that I've seen you be erased. Have you dealt with that? Does it matter to you?

COURTNEY A couple of different answers to that. Most of the time as a writer... I was a journalist too, so there's a bit of being a journalist that is about don't look at me. Look at the subject. Even in our conversation right now, as much as this is your show, you're doing the thing that I would be doing if I had mine, which is asking the other person the questions and trying to get... Because this is that moment for your audience to be able to talk to me. So I feel as though part of it is that a core of our audience are 50 fans, and 50 is their face. In a way that's the thing he enjoys. I don't like being on camera. I don't like doing all that. That's not really me. I can't really deal with the public in that way. When people are like The hell with you, 50. He's like, Yeah. He gets them right back. He's really good at the clap backs and all that.

That's not for me. I don't really want to do that. I'm busy working and being a mom. I can't do all that. So part of it is that's really great marketing. That works best. Part of it is that when I've been on the 50 Most Powerful Showrunner list or some of these other lists and Variety and those things. And it's really about your peer group to some extent, and it's really about what is going to allow you to do more work. As you well know, when you wrote the book, it's like you wrote the book and then that allowed you to do more work. And that more work begat more

work. So really the question is, What gives me more work? And I guess that is ultimately what it is because I want to be able to provide for my child. And so, being that lie isn't going to do that.

I don't care so much as I'm the showrunner of the show. I want to deal with other showrunners, I want to talk to other showrunners. I want to be able to run more shows. And I feel like that's where the impact is. And then anyone who wants to find me or wants to see me, I'm out there. I'm on Instagram or whatever. But if you are a young writer and you want advice about writing or you're a mom and you want to talk about the crush of being a working mom and trying to hold down a job and be a good parent, I'm there for you. You can find me.

But I don't feel so much erased as I feel like I do what I do, 50 does what he does, and that's what makes a good partnership in a way. I think if I was trying to be out there and like... I don't know. I'd have to do a lot of things if I was going to be out there.

Every so often I think about like, Do I want to figure out a way to be a sot? Like, transform myself into showrunner slash sot. But I don't want to be that famous. I don't have that kind of time.

LUVVIE You know what, I think you nailed something here. You've nailed something here. I feel like the people who can do work without having to face the publicness of it all, the backlash, the caps of it all have nailed it. You are at the perfect intersection of where you're making your money, your peers know you, you're getting the opportunities, but you don't have to deal with the Shade Room-ness of it all.

COURTNEY Yeah. There's not a downside to that. I don't need to be more famous. I have friends who are famous. One of my good friends La La Anthony. I don't need that. She is I think so great at what she does and all the different things. She's a great actress and she's a wonderful human being and a great mom. She's a superlative mother. And she puts all that energy and I see that. Then we go out to dinner and people have to interrupt the meal, they need to talk to her, they want to take a picture, or whatever. And I'm like, I don't want that necessarily. People do ask me for pictures and stuff and it's great. I appreciate the support, but I'm just saying that it's for me a thing where you don't necessarily want to invite that into your life. And I personally don't post pictures of my daughter online, because I don't want people to be mad that Ghost dead and feel like they have to take it out on my kid.

LUVVIE Can I just tell you, people really feel a lot of feelings about things. And they really take it deep. People feel a lot of feelings about TV shows and what happens. I know Tariq, Michael Rainey Jr who plays Tariq on *Power*, he posts on Instagram frequently that he gets death threats because people hate his character so much. And I'm like, Why is everybody this...? I understand. Good storytelling is actually a testament to the good storytelling of the show, but people really do be in their feelings. So I think it's an amazing idea that you don't post your daughter.

COURTNEY I actually want to talk about that a little bit, because it's weird. I'm never in a totally safe space to say this, but I feel like I'm in a safe space with you to say this. I really, really don't understand the people who feel like they need to put a death threat over the internet to a minor. He was a minor at one point. He's 19 now, but people were sending him that stuff when he was under 18. And then as an 18-year-old. Now, you're a grown-ass person and you need to threaten a kid?

What's wrong with you? Literally, fundamentally something is wrong with you. Really wrong. You need to go seek help because it's not funny, it's not cute. That's a human being doing his job, and by the way, doing his job so well that you believe him. Keep in mind that most of these people, when they were 18 or 19-years-old couldn't hold down a full-time job. What are you talking about? Literally, what are you talking about?

LUVVIE Honestly, I'm in a state where I'm just like this is maddening. This is maddening.

COURTNEY It is but I feel protective because this is a child that has grown up under my watch. He was 11-years-old when I hired him. 11, he was a fifth-grader. And these grown-ass men, men, grown-ass men threatening a kid? There was this guy that threatened to like rape and murder Lela because when Angela arrested Ghost at the end of season three. He thought it was ha, ha, ha funny jokes. The FBI got involved. It was like a whole thing because he thought it was funny. But she hadn't done anything. Lela went to work, she showed up, she took a shower, she learned her lines, she went to work. I wrote that Angela had arrested Ghost. By the way, all fake people who don't actually exist, it is so frustrating to me, I understand, I'm thankful so much for people being passionate about the show, but it is a television show.

LUVVIE Yeah, please relax.

COURTNEY It is a television show.

LUVVIE Everybody relax.

COURTNEY And it's a place where people work. Relax! Take it down about 10 to 15 notches. Really. Also, the people who write on my Instagram, "Worst writing ever. You're a terrible writer because Ghost is dead." No, I'm a great writer, because you're mad about it. I don't care if you don't like it, but your passion about it actually proves my point. And that was the whole thing was that anybody could have stopped him at any time and yoked him up, but he thought he was unstoppable. He showed no humility before God and that's what happens. If you can't figure that out-

LUVVIE He kept on saying, "No one can stop me." He kept saying it. He was like, "Nobody can stop me." At that point, pride comes before the fall, which is pride came before that fall.

COURTNEY Literally. I showed a fall you all. I didn't make this stuff up.

LUVVIE Literally, pride came before the fall.

COURTNEY Literally! I'm going to say, I'm not even that good. I'm a hack. I straight up had him fall down. He literally fell. What are you talking about? It's just so funny. It's all Biblical. I didn't make anything up. It's Biblical, it's Shakespearian, it's all those things.

LUVVIE And I loved it, I loved it. And I was watching *Power* so proud that a Black woman was behind this work. I saw the quality was amazing. Everybody was so in their feelings because the writing was so good. That just brought me so much pride because your work did everything that people might have thought it couldn't have done. And as you're doing this, you mentioned La La, what is the group that supports you? Who are the people that see you in the quiet moments?

COURTNEY Well, I have a spiritual community, so my spiritual community that's really my dog. La La is important to me. Gabriella Reibe who is one of my writers. She was my assistant the first two years of *Power*. She's a genius and has been in my corner. I had a friend, Shanta who was with me for a long time. I had had a lot of really close female friends. My tribe of women for sure. They've been great. And my mom, really supportive. My brother. I've been very fortunate.

LUVVIE What do you think is the thing that you were proudest of that you've done so far in your career or in your life in general?

COURTNEY This is cliché, but I made a person, a generous, kind person who is talented and sweet and smart and loving.

LUVVIE That's real. I don't think it's cliché if it's true.

COURTNEY Yeah, it's true.

LUVVIE As you were doing all of this TV dominating, writing all this good stuff, running shows, there's five shows coming, spin-offs of *Power*, which is wild. That's basically like *SVU* level, that's *Law and Order* level. How are you taking care of yourself?

COURTNEY Oh boy. Well, let's see. I have to put in an endorsement for [My Next 90 Days planner from Savor Beauty](#). That thing is dope. I've been using that. Well, I work with spiritual programs, so obviously that's the essence of self-care. Having a really with a higher power is pretty much fundamental. Prayer, meditation, writing. I'd say I like a massage.

LUVVIE 90 minutes? 60 minutes? What are you doing?

COURTNEY I love a beach. What?

LUVVIE Are you doing, 90 minutes or 60 minutes?

COURTNEY Of what? Meditation?

LUVVIE Of massage.

COURTNEY Oh, massage. Two hours if I can get it, Girl.

LUVVIE Two hours!

COURTNEY 90s a mess. Yeah, two hours if I can get it for sure. I carry my tension in my shoulders, so they need to be worked out. Baths, I love a bath. I like things that smell good. I love beauty like I told you. I like to give myself a facial now and then. I don't know. I like to watch *Murder She Wrote* reruns.

LUVVIE That's very auntie of you. That is very black auntie of you.

COURTNEY I am a black auntie. Really I am a black auntie. First of all, I have a nephew, but second of all, I am an auntie. Look, I'm 42 right now, so I'm auntie age for sure.

LUVVIE So favorite face products, because I'm all into the serums and the moisturizers? I always want to know what people are using on their face that you love.

COURTNEY Okay. Well, I could go on forever. But I think the number one big change in my skin life that's happened recently is [Sunday Riley CEO face oil](#).

LUVVIE Yes, the vitamin C stuff?

COURTNEY Yes, the vitamin C stuff, like [the oil](#). And [there's a serum](#). Those two products will change your skin. And then [Good Genes also by Sunday Riley](#). At night, it's like that is a whole other set up. My skin is bright, it's glowing. My skin is so different now because of that.

LUVVIE I'm trying to tell people like you all step this game up. Vitamin C serums is game-changing. And [Sunday Riley's whole line](#) including [Good Genes](#), which is the lactic acid, look. Everything. It is worth all the monies.

COURTNEY It's worth all the money. And by the way, I'm telling you even if you can afford one of those products, even one, even just [Good Genes](#) will change your skin. Applied religiously will change your skin. People, please find them. They don't understand that [Sunday Riley](#) is the truth. I would totally stan them.

LUVVIE Stan them. And in case people are worried about the pricing, just remember this lasts you like six to eight months. I think it's like \$90. You won't have to buy another one for another six months. I'm telling you it's worth the money.

Courtney, how can people support you now? What is your next thing that *Power's* done? Is there anything you can tell us about?

COURTNEY There's the spin-off of *Power*. I am starting to work on an HBO series about cops, so that's really fun. The way I love support is people follow me on Instagram. I'm on Twitter. I'm trying to think about my next thing. Speaking of the Writer's Guild, we may go on strike pretty soon, which will definitely disrupt everybody's television and film watching. But if we do go on strike, I'm definitely going to start to really think about beauty and writing. I started a couple of short stories just to keep creative because it can get very easy to make this into a job, as you probably well know. It starts as something you love and then it becomes a job. And you're like, Oh I got to do this for my job, as opposed to, I get to do this for my job.

Remaining grateful, remaining humble that's so important. Giving time to create, I think, to really write. And still do writing exercises, still, open up [Bird by Bird](#), still open up [Writing Down the Bones](#), still open up different kinds of writing prompting exercises, and still doing those exercises even when you don't want, even when you're tired. I guess I speak to all the writers out there. But I think it's the truth, anybody who wants to do anything, which is do a little bit of it every day. Don't say, Okay I'm going to do my day job Monday through Friday, and then Saturday and Sunday I'm going to write because Saturday and Sunday you're going to have other

things to do. Take a moment at your day job, take your lunch break, figure out a way. This is a hard thing for a lot of people, but the truth is there is a moment where your awake and your kids are asleep. There is that moment. It does exist. What are you doing with that time, because that time is that's the time that you need.

So if, for example, your kids go to bed at 8:00. If you can stay up until 10:00, what could you do with those two hours? What could you do with those two hours? And some nights it's going to be time with your spouse, of course, it is, or with your significant other. But sometimes that 8:00 to 10:00 you've got to figure out how half an hour of that is you doing something towards the thing you want to do.

LUVVIE And that right there is how you drop the mic. Courtney, thank you so much for coming on this show. This interview just gave me all the life.

COURTNEY Thank you for having me. You're amazing.

LUVVIE I'm just such a huge fan of your work, and I'm looking forward to whatever the next thing you're doing. And I'll let people know where to find you on social media. You're awesome.

COURTNEY Thank you. You're awesome, are you kidding me? You've been awesome forever. That's the thing that people don't know. Luvvie has been like this forever. She is the truth. I should just make a commercial for you is what I should do. Anyway...

LUVVIE Listen, I'm just waiting for one day when I'm going to ask you like, Courtney can I just come sit at your feet and watch you do something for like a day, so I can just learn. One day you'll get that phone call from me.

COURTNEY You're welcome any time.

LUVVIE Yes!

COURTNEY You're welcome any time.

LUVVIE Yes, thank you so much. And we'll be in touch.

COURTNEY Okay, great. Thanks, honey. Bye.

LUVVIE Bye, Courtney.

Y'all, much love to Courtney Kemp for taking the time to join me on Rants and Randomness. Please follow her on social media. She's [@courtneykemp](#) on Twitter and [@courtneyakemp](#) on Instagram. Courtney, C. O. U. R. T. N E Y, and then A Kemp, K. E. M. P.

Y'all stay safe and well out here. We'll be back in two weeks with another episode and much love the [Chicago Recording Company](#) for partnering with me on this. Even recording from home during these times, they've got me sounding on point.

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