

The Assignment with Audie Cornish

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What's Your Sign? Astrology's Modern Renaissance



Speakers Audie Cornish, NBC News, Crossfire, CBS, Tobiasthoth, Jkitscole, Mamaa.arii, Gayle King, Jennifer Freed, Chani Nicholas

00:00:00

Audie Cornish

Back in the 1980s when First Lady Nancy Reagan revealed that she consulted an astrologer? Well, let's just say it wasn't pretty.

00:00:10

NBC News

New reports of Mrs. Reagan's reliance on an astrologer raised new questions about national security.

00:00:16

Crossfire

They consult the charts to determine the hour for inauguration treaty signings. And please, God, don't tell us. What else? Is that why we invaded Grenada? Because Jupiter had entered the third orbit of Mars?

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Audie Cornish

Oh, how the tide has turned.

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CBS

If you were having a bad day or feel like everything is going wrong, you may be tempted to blame it on the phenomenon known as Mercury Retrograde.

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Tobiasthoth

Stop what you're doing. Fortune just released an article on the top ten signs most likely to be a billionaire. It looks like 12% of the world's billionaires are Libras.

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Jkitscole

Here's my rules for dating a Gemini. As a Gemini, I think it's important that I share these rules.

00:00:56

Audie Cornish

In fact, we are nearly at peak meme-ification.

00:01:00

Mamaa.arii

So, like, what's your sign? A barbecue sun? A chicken rising? Boop. No. Sis, why are you crying? What's going on, like? Girl, my grandma passed away, and it's just been a really hard like. Man, I know you a Toyota moon. So I know ya'll be taking things to the heart, that's crazy.

00:01:16

Audie Cornish

When Mercury is retrograde everyone seems to know it, even if they don't know exactly what it means.

00:01:22

Gayle King

No wonder I want to impulsively give myself new bangs and reach out to all my ex-boyfriends. Love that one.

00:01:28

Audie Cornish

The search terms, birth chart and astrology hit five year peaks on Google Trends in 2020. At this point, the astrology industry is estimated to be worth more than \$2 billion. That's according to a report from market research firm IBISWorld. With venture capital being poured into apps and more. And yes, some of you are rolling your eyes. But how did astrology become a multi-billion dollar industry? What can its growing popularity tell us about ourselves and this moment? And before you ask if it's real, ask yourself if that's even the right question. I'm Audie Cornish. And this is The Assignment.

00:02:16

Audie Cornish

We've brought in some experts today. No historians or scholars on American religiosity. Instead, the people who know this world best.

00:02:24

Jennifer Freed

This has been a consumer based, beautiful discipline for thousands of years because it's relevant. It's the oldest lasting personality system.

00:02:35

Audie Cornish

That's Jennifer Freed, astrologer to the stars. She's read charts for everyone from the Gwyneth Paltrow to comedian Tig Notaro. And she's been practicing astrology for 40 years. Jennifer also has a Ph.D. in psychotherapy.

00:02:51

Jennifer Freed

When I first started and nobody was quite familiar with astrology, they thought I was a whack job crazy woman that was predicting the stars.

00:03:00

Chani Nicholas

I don't think planets make us do things. I really do feel like it's this cosmic reflection.

00:03:07

Audie Cornish

Chani Nicholas is a leading astrologer and a writer, and if you follow astrology at all, you've probably heard of her to date. Her app called Chani has more than a million total downloads. She was Oprah's resident astrologer for a while and did a public reading for Lizzo.

00:03:24

Chani Nicholas

If you look at astrology historically, like over the past 2000 years, that is when it comes in and it becomes part of the lexicon of the culture of that moment when we are in these moments of great change and great divide and chaos, astrology usually resurges. So we can look at 2016 up until this point, having like a major kind of influx in conjunction with social media. And then if we look back to the sixties and seventies. Of course, we don't have to do much explaining about that time period on the planet being such an opening and such a moment of massive change.

00:04:06

Jennifer Freed

There's also a huge period in the early 1900s that was ushered in by this famous woman, Evangeline Adams, who actually put astrology on the map in the early 1900s. And there is an extraordinary moment where she's arrested for fraud and she goes to court because she doesn't want to pay the fine. She wants to testify. The judge gives her a chart, not saying who it is. She reads the chart so successfully that the judge dismisses all charges and says that she has now elevated astrology to a dignified science. And this was a moment in our history where astrology became widespread. Her prominent client was JP Morgan. He said astrology isn't for millionaires, it's for billionaires. So there are these moments in collective history where people are struggling and they want to have a sense of a compass. Where are we going? Who am I in this very mysterious cosmos?

00:05:10

Audie Cornish

What I love about this story also, though, is it gets at the roots or it reflects this idea that people who are cynics think that astrology is fraudulent in some way or that its practitioners are scamming people. So you're saying even in this moment, right, like it's still a test - is this real or is this B.S.

00:05:30

Jennifer Freed

Completely.

00:05:31

Jennifer Freed

And I always say to people when they say, is it B.S.? Is it a scam? I say, I'm not trying to convince anybody. This has been a consumer based, beautiful discipline for thousands of years because it's relevant. It's the oldest lasting personality system. We know that if something isn't useful, people kick it out. They get so much value. I don't need to convince anybody else to try it out. That's not our job.

Audie Cornish 00:06:02 Help me understand how you define astrology in this day and age. Is it horoscopes? Is it charts? Is it tarot cards? Like, what do you mean when you tell people you're an astrologer? How do you define astrology?

Chani Nicholas 00:06:19 Well, I don't often tell people I'm an astrologer.

Audie Cornish 00:06:23 Ah ha. Now we're getting somewhere. What is your fear?

Chani Nicholas 00:06:26 I don't have a fear. I just get annoyed because it's such a misunderstood field, I think by the majority of people, which is fine. It is what it is. So I often just say if I'm meeting somebody that I have a tech company, that I have an app, and then if they ask more, I'll say an astrology app, and then they don't usually ask much more because a lot of the astrology apps. Well, I'll leave it at that.

Audie Cornish 00:06:49 No, go ahead.

Chani Nicholas 00:06:50 No.

Jennifer Freed 00:06:51 I can help with this idea. Yeah.

Chani Nicholas 00:06:55 What I mean when I say I'm an astrologer is that I view the sky as a mirror to what it is we are experiencing here on Earth. So there's the mirror of the moment of your birth that contains within it the potential of your life. And then there's also the ongoing mirror that's always changing, that's reflecting back to us the quality of time that we're living within. I don't think planets make us do things. I don't think that they are responsible for things happening. I really do feel like it's this cosmic reflection that if we want, we can look at and see if there's value there and if it helps to give us context, especially in the times that are really challenging and that are a struggle for us to get through.

Audie Cornish 00:07:46 You said that people have a kind of perception about what astrology is, and I do hear a lot of things, not just that it's silly, but I also hear this very weird term which is woo woo, which like culturally I am not understanding. What does this mean? Jennifer, you're smiling. Are you, like, familiar with this?

Jennifer Freed 00:08:08 Yes. I live in Santa Barbara, California. Woo! Woo! Woo! Woo! Woo! Woo! Woo woo means anything outside the canon of acceptable ideas. So it's anything that takes us beyond rational knowledge.

Audie Cornish 00:08:23 So astrology for people falls under this. It's like.

Jennifer Freed 00:08:27 For some people they think of it as...

Audie Cornish 00:08:28 Crystals and...

Jennifer Freed 00:08:30 And I think that that's a reductive and stereotypical picture of something that has so much substance and depth. But I also don't mind woo, woo. Why not woo woo? The rational stuff hasn't taken us very far. We are in an incredible time of suffering. So I think it's time to get a little more woo woo.

Chani Nicholas 00:08:50 Yeah. The fact of the matter is, I don't care if you don't like astrology, like, great. I really want people to find the modalities that fit them, that suit them so that they can move into their own healing and move into their own purpose. And we can all move towards solution. My focus and my work is that I have astrology as a tool or a vehicle, but what I really want is social change. I really want to create spaces to be part of creating spaces where healing and justice can occur.

00:09:22

Jennifer Freed

And I think astrology also is radical in that it turns the power back to the people. It's not mediated through the priest. In every single ancient church in Europe, there are zodiac symbols everywhere. It wasn't until men said, You must go through me not direct knowing of the cosmos that astrology was banned and made for witches and insane people.

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Audie Cornish

Jennifer Freed, it's interesting what you're saying because you're getting at how it's neither science nor religion. It's in between two very powerful poles of culture.

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Jennifer Freed

Yes, I think the most important things in life and Einstein talked about this too, is being interested in the uncertainty and the mystery. And having the humility to know we don't know. But there are signs and symbols in this animated cosmos that we're part of. We're not dominant over this nature and this beautiful celestial sky. We're part of it. So I see it as a divine partnership.

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Chani Nicholas

When you look at the cycles of the sun and the moon and you look at every major religious tradition, they generally have their festivals situated around either or both. And you look at like how Easter falls around the equinox and how Christmas falls close to the solstice. You look at how Jews celebrate every new moon. We've had this connection forever, and so we've disconnected ourselves because of, we could say, like scientific revolution and all of the other things that came in to say, This is wrong. But humans have always depended on our relationship with the sky to help us locate ourselves.

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Audie Cornish

Chani, help me understand why... what do you think is driving the current boom in interest?

00:11:20

Chani Nicholas

I think the really challenging moment that we're in, both in terms of whatever country we're located in, there's a rise of fascism the world over. We, again, since 2016, have gone through some major shifts politically. The pandemic, of course, skyrocketed everything. There was just a lot more attention being paid to astrology, and it was all around like the popularity of Instagram. And then when Tik-tok came in, it just proliferated the system and actually in a really deep way helped a lot of people understand astrology in a much more kind of concrete and rooted way. It's not really just about what your sun sign is anymore. There's actual an understanding of this system.

00:12:10

Jennifer Freed

I see it as the advent of the digital age, people having much more access to information they didn't have before. But also the mental health problems have escalated with the digital age because even though we are plugged in all the time, we're not truly connected. We've lost what we call social emotional skills, and that's my expertise. So part of what I see is there's really a big increase in anxiety and depression and a search for meaning. All human beings need purpose, meaning and pleasure.

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Audie Cornish

So how does astrology fit into that?

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Jennifer Freed

It fits in because astrology can reveal to people some of their purposes. It certainly can give you a sense of meaning. The "Why am I here? What are my gifts? What can I contribute?" And I think there is an immense pleasure at feeling safe, seen and celebrated. And when I read a chart, I am looking at the very best possibilities of who you are. And people really relish in remembering who they are, not by virtue of how many likes they get, but what are they here for?

00:13:28

Audie Cornish

And it also occurs to me that you get all of that without the sort of morality requirements or maybe relationship to shame that some people might experience with organized religion.

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Jennifer Freed

I would like to speak to that because I've had so many clients come to me that are both quite religious, but also very disappointed with institutionalized racism, heterosexism and abuse of religious figures. So I think we're in this prime moment of people still want to feel connected and want to feel a sense of divine knowing, but they don't want it to be given by hypocritical institutions. Astrology is an everyone welcome experience and you don't have to identify as anything to get in.

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Audie Cornish

Chani, you've been using this in a very specific way. You have coupled it with your politics.

00:14:36

Chani Nicholas

Yeah.

00:14:37

Audie Cornish

Arguably some people might come to astrology because they don't really want to be into that, right? They don't want to think about that in that moment.

00:14:44

Chani Nicholas

Yes.

00:14:44

Audie Cornish

You're bringing these two things together. How and why is there value in that to you? Or is that just something that reflects the moment that we're in? When people's politics are part of their identity in a really profound way?

00:14:57

Chani Nicholas

Yeah. I think that's also why astrology has had this major boom, because identity and the politics of identity started to really infiltrate the mainstream discussion through social media. And astrology and its ability to help us identify our own qualities and our setbacks and our gifts and all of that is also ...

00:15:19

Audie Cornish

And to signal something.

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Chani Nicholas

Yeah, exactly. It's a shorthand.

00:15:20

Audie Cornish

Somehow to people we meet, right? Like I'm a black woman, immigrant and a Libra. And then people are like, they're like, Oh, now I get it. And I'm like, "You get what", you know?

00:15:31

Chani Nicholas

Yeah, exactly.

00:15:32

Audie Cornish

It speaks to that idea that Jennifer, as you said, it's it's not it's a low bar of entry, but it is still about identity.

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Chani Nicholas

It is yeah. Yes. So it's it can help us to connect. And I think that we feel so disconnected and dislocated. And I think religion used to hold something in the collective. And because of the ways in which the institutions of religion didn't advance at the time, those structures have not held us. And so we naturally look for other structures. And especially in a country where we really do have such incredible diversity, how do we then also find ways to understand each other and feel unity? And so..

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Audie Cornish

You're describing all things organized religion used to do.

00:16:19

Chani Nicholas

Exactly.

00:16:20

Audie Cornish

You celebrated births and deaths and marriages. Okay. So you were seen and celebrated. You were in community constantly.

00:16:28

Chani Nicholas

Yeah.

00:16:28

Audie Cornish

I'm speaking as an ex Christian camper. I guess you can probably hear her coming out. And also the social justice part. I mean, particularly in the Black community, there's a long history of political action through church. So it's almost like I'm listening to you describe church.

00:16:42

Chani Nicholas

Yeah.

00:16:42

Audie Cornish

But you're not talking about church.

00:16:44

Chani Nicholas

Right, but we're still talking about the divinity of you and your fellows and how to be in connection with that, how to center that. How do we center our humanity and move in that direction? How do we stop being obsessed with massive expansion and massive gain and massive profit and instead become just so focused on the quality of our lives and the lives of everybody we share this planet with?

00:17:14

Audie Cornish

When we come back, the business of reading the stars, being a conscious consumer. And yes, I'm going to get a reading.

00:17:22

Jennifer Freed

I have seen your chart, but Chani has not. Only because...

00:17:27

Audie Cornish

But I don't know what time of day I was born.

00:17:29

Jennifer Freed

I know. We have some things that reflect you beautifully, in my opinion.

00:17:42

Audie Cornish

So woo woo aside, astrology is also a business. And over the last few years it's been booming Consultations, classes, conferences, a slew of new apps and startups. Let's be real. It's never been easier to shop for a candle that matches your zodiac sign. And veteran astrologers like Chani Nicholas and Jennifer Freed, who have been practicing for decades, are watching this closely.

00:18:09

Jennifer Freed

If there's money to be made on the cheap, people are all for it. So there's intense corruption, misinformation, hyperbole about astrology that is offensive to me. I consider myself one of the voices to keep reminding people what it's really about. But there are a few apps out there that you click on the day and they will say things like, "Today is a day that you will be deceived by someone. Stay out of any type of conflict because it will turn out badly." It's sensationalized, it's fear driven, it's inaccurate, and it's just working off people's cortisol and adrenaline.

00:18:54

Audie Cornish

Oh, interesting.

00:18:54

Jennifer Freed

And that is offensive to me. Astrology, for me, has always been about helping people achieve and reach their highest potential. Not about making them less or more frightened. We already live in a frightening world. So, yes, I do check out other things and there's very few things right now that really reach a level of integrity I'm comfortable with.

00:19:19

Audie Cornish

Hmm. Interesting, because we are at the point of kind of mainstream saturation where you can have very random websites saying like Mercury's in retrograde. You know what that means? And I'm like, I do? It sounds terrible. You know, like it's very clearly supposed to convey something because it's showing us how mainstream the idea is. But you're saying.

00:19:41

Jennifer Freed

Be cautious, Very cautious, very discerning. I feel like this is a perfect parallel because I've grown up with extraordinary journalists like yourself. And now look at who passes for journalists. It's the same.

00:19:55

Audie Cornish

So. My production staff insists that I should have some sort of chart done or that I should somehow tell you something about myself that will lead you to have thoughts. But now, given our conversation, I feel like that would be a very superficial approach to astrology.

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Chani Nicholas

Well, there's a couple of things that, you know, you could look at your chart and say..

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Audie Cornish

Are we going to do this? Should we just do this?

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Jennifer Freed

I have seen your chart but Chani has not.

00:20:21

Audie Cornish

You have?

00:20:22

Chani Nicholas

I've got the day.

Audie Cornish 00:20:25
But I don't know what time of day I was born.

Chani Nicholas 00:20:27
So we only have a general kind of picture. We don't have a specific one.

Jennifer Freed 00:20:31
We have some things that reflect you beautifully, in my opinion.

Audie Cornish 00:20:36
Okay.

Jennifer Freed 00:20:37
You know, to me, the most important thing about your chart is that you were born with this extraordinary gift of having your words align with your values. No one is ever going to push you off your moral compass. You have Mercury with Venus, and you also have, which I love the Mercury Square, Mars, which is you aren't afraid to ask the tough questions. And so people are going to find you credible and believable.

Chani Nicholas 00:21:16
Yeah, I'd say, like your two luminaries, the sun and the moon are both in air signs, and air signs are about conversation, communication, exchange of ideas. And so that's where you shine. That's what you reflect. That's going to be a main mode of operation for you. And just to pick up on something Jennifer said, your Mercury is in Scorpio, so it wants to go deep into conversations. It wants to be investigative. It wants to uncover what is normally hidden. And there's a need to, like, go into situations that other people might find tenuous or even a little dangerous. But there's a need to risk something in the conversation.

Audie Cornish 00:21:58
So what are my obstacles? Let's get to the nitty gritty.

Jennifer Freed 00:22:02
That would be a Mercury Mars question. You're one of those people that says, tell me the bad news right now.

Audie Cornish 00:22:09
All right. Now we're getting to the stuff I recognize. Yeah, give me my challenges.

Jennifer Freed 00:22:17
So what I would say looking at it is that you have in numerous gifts, in communication, in application, and you have tremendous self-doubt and self-sabotaging patterns that you will have to constantly face and undo. So in other words, we all know how great you are. You're the last person on the plane to say, I'm great. You're always looking for how you're going to have to improve and be better than you are to claim the worthiness of all of this adulation.

Audie Cornish 00:22:54
So what's interesting about this, and I'll just unpack it in real time, is, you know, I am, of course, hearing some things that I feel very like That's obvious. And then I'm also hearing some things that I'm like, how do they know that I'm worried, right? And and and I think I'm better understanding the concept of feeling seen like it's very individual, this practice. And so it's interesting because, as you said, it's like low bar of entry, but then you can go really deep and then it's like, okay, there's a little bit of ego there. It's sort of perfect for the Internet. And Jennifer, you have talked about this idea of... That we're mirror hungry. What does that mean?

Jennifer Freed 00:23:43
There's two parts I want to say here. One is you're absolutely right. This is pabulum for the masses if it's used just as look at your own navel, which it can be. Like, just look at yourself, look at yourself, be reflected to yourself. But I think astrology is inherently one of the biggest empathy, compassion tools that we have on this planet. So it's it's inherently relational. But the astrologers and the apps have to point to that.

Chani Nicholas 00:24:11
But it's just a tool. So it's all about how you use it. You can use it for really bad means to an end and you can use it for really good. It's literally just something that you can work with. It's really about the intention and the acts within which you perpetuate using the thing. It's like a hammer. A hammer can be really devastatingly violent or wonderfully a wonderful accomplice to building something gorgeous.

Audie Cornish 00:24:41
You know, given all that you've said, it occurs to me that asking whether astrology is, quote unquote, real or not, it sounds like it just kind of misses the point.

Chani Nicholas 00:24:57
I hope so.

Jennifer Freed 00:25:01
Not only does it miss the point, it's missed the boat. Millions of people are finding it relevant. So whether it's real or not, it's a little off purpose at this point. It's like any tool. How are we using it? Let's be responsible, compassionate, forward thinking. And as Chani and I both agree, let's use it as a tool for liberation, not just confirmation.

Audie Cornish 00:25:35
That was psychological astrologer Dr. Jennifer Freed. We also heard from Chani Nicholas, astrologer and founder of the Chani App.

Audie Cornish 00:25:46
And that's it for this episode of The Assignment. If you liked it, share it with friends. If you are loving it, leave us a rating and a review.

Audie Cornish 00:25:55
And one more thing - we're doing an episode on the new etiquette around tipping. We want to hear from you. Whether you depend on tips or you aren't sure how much to give. What questions do you have about the practice? Be honest. Who do you tip? How much did that change because of the pandemic? Give us a call on our tip line. See what I did there? That's 202854 8802. Or record a voicemail and email it to us at the assignment at CNN dot com.

Audie Cornish 00:26:27
The assignment is a production of CNN Audio. Our producers are Madeleine Thompson, Jennifer Lai, Lori Galarreta, Carla Javier and Dan Bloom. Our associate producer is Isoke Samuel, and our senior producer is Matt Martinez. Mixing and sound design by David Schulman. Dan Dzula is our technical director. Steve Lickteig is our executive producer and special thanks to Katie Hinman. And I want to give a couple more shout outs. First to the hilarious creators on astrology tik-tok Tobiasthoth, Jkitscole, and Mamaa Aarii, that's two A's, two I's, but you can check out the spelling and their work in our episode notes. And the birds outside Jennifer Freed's window. They really added something to the reading. I'm Audie Cornish. Thank you for listening.

Audie Cornish 00:27:34
This is why I'm doing this show. I get to be like, I've always wanted to talk to this kind of person or that kind of person, yeah.

Chani Nicholas 00:27:41
Your Gemini moon loves it. It wants diversity, it wants conversation. It doesn't want to it doesn't want to arrive at an answer. It just really wants to stimulate some really good conversation and be open to whatever happens, whatever we learn.

Audie Cornish 00:27:55
I love it.