Tuck: Bistitchual offers a wide range of beautiful, queer, and/or Canadian indie dyed yarn and handmade accessories. They also offer beginner and not-so-beginner knitting and crochet Zoom classes, so you can join from anywhere in the world. Visit them in person at Annette Street in Toronto, or shop online at Bistitchual.ca with free international shipping for orders over $100.

[Gender Reveal theme music plays]

Tuck: Welcome to Gender Reveal, a podcast where we hopefully get a little bit closer to understanding what the hell gender is. I’m your host and resident gender detective, Tuck Woodstock.

[Gender Reveal theme music ends]

Tuck: Hey everyone. Hope you’re all hanging in there. This week on the show I am thrilled to share our conversation with author, film critic, and filthcore queen, Gretchen Felker-Martin. I’ve been looking forward to this chat for a long time, and it was such a treat to talk with Gretchen about the TERFy world of gender plague novels, horror as a tool for personal growth, and whether art can do harm.

Gretchen [in interview excerpt]: I think when we call art dangerous, what we almost always mean is that it made us uncomfortable.

Tuck: But before we get to that, just a reminder that we have a robust array of merch this month, including our new “Trans Musicians are Hotter” shirts, and the return of our “More Kink at Pride” tank tops. I personally wear my “More Kink at Pride” tank top all the time, so if you get one, we can match. That’s all at bit.ly/gendermerch. Also, I know it’s a weird time for everyone, but I’m just throwing this out there. We run almost entirely on listener donations, so if you have one, or five, or ten dollars to spare, you can support the show at patreon.com/gender, and it would really mean a lot to us. But no pressure. And now, it’s time for This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender music plays]

Tuck: This week, we’ve been staying away from this topic, but I’m recording this on the day that the *New York Times Magazine* published yet another feature story on whether we should let trans kids be trans, hot off of a *New York Times* article that said, “Hey, more and more kids are trans these days!” And while I don’t want to talk directly about these articles, because who has the time, I do want to equip you with some handy talking points about these topics. Because it seems like we’re simply not going to escape them anytime soon.

So, new data shows that the total number of self-identified trans people in the United States is up compared to a few years ago. Yeah, of course it is! As more and more people learn about the possibilities of being trans in ways that feel relevant and accessible to them, whether that’s through real-life encounters with trans people, or this very podcast, we will continue to see those numbers rise. Not infinitely, but for a while. It’s like if there was a secret soccer team in your town that nobody knew how to try out for, or even how to watch. And then one year, that team decided to give out free tickets to every game, and also like, hold public tryouts. And then all of a sudden soccer was way more popular in your town. You could say, “It’s so weird that so many people are interested in local soccer compared to last year!” But you would be ignoring the obvious difference in visibility and accessibility. Of course, for this metaphor to work, you would have to get two doctor’s notes in order to get shin guards, or whatever, but that’s beside the point.

[Background music with low, gentle tones fades in]

Why does it matter that increasing numbers of people describe themselves as trans? Great question. It’s literally *doesn’t* matter. A growing trans population is only an issue if you think that trans people do not deserve to exist in society. The same way that a growing immigrant or refugee or non-white population is only an issue if we think that those people do not deserve to be here. Trans people transitioning does not threaten cis people’s ability to be cis, nor does it change cis people’s lives in any meaningful way. I know Obama was lying when he said this, but I mean it when I say, if you like your gender, you can keep your gender!

Anyway, this new data shows that youth are more likely to describe themselves as trans than adults over the age of 25, and particularly over the age of 65. And again, this makes so much sense that it barely feels worth explaining. This is arguably the first generation of young people in this country who are able to learn about trans and nonbinary identities from a young age. And because youth are more likely to both know trans people, and know about trans people, they are more likely to be trans. See again, secret soccer team. And yet, not only are teens being told that they’re too young to know whether they’re really trans, they’re also being told that they’re too old to really be trans. Part of the ROGD argument that we’ve discussed in previous segments is that real trans people would know they’re trans since birth. In reality, people realize they’re trans at different times due to a wide variety of factors. Some children talk about their gender as soon as they’re able to talk. Many others realize they’re trans around puberty, probably because puberty is a time when our experiences in our bodies and the way the world treats us typically become even more gendered than they were before. And then some of us, particularly older trans people, didn’t realize we were trans until we could like, fully grow up and log onto Tumblr, or until we met trans people who showed us what could be possible.

[Background music fades out]

And of course, once someone realizes they’re trans, it could still be years or even decades before they’re given the support they need to actually transition. And that’s a societal failure, not a personal one. And speaking of society, and the ROGD of it all, any claims that teens are trans due to social contagion are mildly correct, while also completely missing the point. Obviously, words like “contagion,” or “rapid-onset,” or even “patient zero,” which was used in the *New York Times* recently, these phrases are used to directly associate transness with disease. It’s weird because we don’t use that kind of language about other things that arguably deserve it more. When I was in middle school and got obsessed with the first *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie, no one said I had rapid-onset Orlando Bloom disorder, even though I arguably did.

But if you want to talk about whether or not our genders are socially influenced, then yes, literally all genders are socially influenced. The WHO defines gender as “A group of socially constructed norms, rules, and other characteristics which vary from society to society and can be changed.” In fact, when I ask cis people how they know what their gender is, the most common answer I get is some version of, “Because other people told me that I was,” or “Because of the way people treat me.” These people are not even picking out their own genders, they’re just taking whatever they’re handed, and you want to say that *trans* people are being influenced by their community? Yes, we are seeing higher rates of trans youth in more quote-unquote “liberal” areas, and that is clearly because those are the places where they are most likely to be allowed to exist.

[Background music with slow, gentle guitar music fades in]

Finally, there continue to be references to the fact that youth who seek transition-related care are disproportionately likely to have depression, anxiety, eating disorders, or some flavor of neurodivergence. It is absolutely wild that these are treated as reasons to withhold care, rather than signals that this person is having an extremely bad time that could perhaps be at least partially alleviated by adults giving them some level of bodily autonomy, or at the very least, validation of their identity and personhood. Because what gets lost in these conversations about medical transition is that being trans and medically transitioning are connected, but distinct things. Denying someone access to medical care does not make them not trans. Refusing to use someone’s name or pronouns or not let them use the bathroom does not make them not trans. Telling a kid that they aren’t trans doesn’t make them not trans. It just makes you wrong. And like, deeply weird.

[Background music fades out]

This has been This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender music plays]

Tuck: We’ve got a Theymail message for you this week. Theymails are tiny messages from listeners. This one is specifically for folks in the Cleveland area, and it says, “Cleveland locals, join us for Evolution’s Rainbow, an evening of queer science hosted by Nina West on June 27. It’s organized by trans and queer evolutionary biologists and will feature talks from experts on the biology of sex and sexuality. TLDR: it’s not binary. Tickets are $5, and proceeds will go to LGBT Community Center of Greater Cleveland. A link to tickets and information will be in the show notes.”

I also want to tell you about another podcast I think you’ll enjoy. LGBTQ&A, hosted by Jeffrey Masters, has a new LGBTQ Elder series that features conversations with the oldest members of our community. This includes people like Barbara Satin, an 87-year-old trans woman who talks about how the trans experience today compares to it 50 years ago. There’s also an interview with me on LGTBQ&A, if you’re looking for a good episode to start with; not in the elder series, just in general. You can subscribe and listen to those interviews on LGBTQ&A, that’s Q&A with an ampersand.

[Gender Reveal theme music plays]

Tuck: Gretchen Felker-Martin is a film critic and horror author. She lives and works in Massachusetts, where all the worst ghosts live.

[Gender Reveal theme music ends]

Tuck: The way we always start the show is by asking, in terms of gender, how do you describe yourself?

Gretchen: I’m a girl. I don’t tend to get terribly complicated about it on any given day. Fagdyke usually covers all the bases.

Tuck: We were literally right before you got here talking about what a joy it is to be both a fag and a dyke, like right before you got here, so yes.

Gretchen: That is living, dude.

Tuck: Well before we dive into all of your work, you said in your bio you live and work in Massachusetts, where all the worst ghosts live. Do you believe in ghosts? I want to know about these ghosts.

Gretchen: [Laughs] No, I don’t. But this is where English colonialism kicks off in a serious way in America, so it feels natural that if there were such a thing as ghosts, they’d be worst here.

Tuck: Well, let’s talk about *Manhunt*. It came out 2/22/22, so hopefully many folks have already heard about it and read about it. I love to ask folks about intended audience. And I was just curious when you were writing the books, did you have a specific person or demographic that you were writing for?

Gretchen: Yeah, the book is for freaks. It’s really for trans freaks. Other people seem to have gotten into it, or have gotten something out of it, and that’s great. But I didn’t write it for them, and I don’t ultimately super care what they think. This book is for my brothers and sisters.

Tuck: I love that. Also again, perfect, because I’m wearing my “We will always be freaks” Mothman shirt.

Gretchen: Hell yeah!

Tuck: So yeah, incredible timing. So I heard an interview where folks asked you, like, what the reception was from cis women. But I was curious what the reception has been like from trans people, especially trans women and any other freaks that you were writing this for, specifically?

Gretchen: Well, a lot of people seemed to have picked up what I put down. This book is really an attempt to communicate to people that all of their anxieties and the things that bounce around in their heads and poison the way that they look at themselves and their loved ones, and their communities—those are not things that they are thinking alone or in a vacuum. Because they’re motivated by forces larger than any of us, and we have the opportunity to shoulder them together, instead of alone. What I think any great horror novel does—not that I think I wrote a great horror novel—but what I think any horror novel worth its salt does, is to give people an opportunity to expand their empathy. And sometimes that’s for themselves, sometimes it’s for groups they wouldn’t mix with. It depends on the book and the reader. Reactions have been overwhelmingly positive, which has surprised me. There are some trans people who, for various reasons, take issue with the book, some of them without reading it, some of them having read it, and that’s fine. I’m not too fussed about that. I’ve seen a handful of their reviews, and I think some of them hold water; I’m not one of the world’s great plotters. And some of them are what I’d call silliness, but that’s okay. It’s not their job to review books; they’re reading books because they enjoy reading. So they get to have whatever opinion they want.

Tuck: Yeah. I think you’re maybe already touching on this a little bit, but there are some really intense feelings in the book, both dysphoria from trans women, and then transmisogyny from cis women towards trans women. So I was recommending this book to a bunch of friends after I finished it, but when I recommended it to trans women, I felt like a little bit pranking them, like, “Enjoy this really good books that’s gonna maybe make you feel like shit a little bit. But it’ll be good!” But you’ve spoken, you’re already speaking, really eloquently many times about the ways that horror can help you process really intense feelings. So I was just wondering if you could talk about why it felt important to grapple with those feelings in your work.

Gretchen: Well, at the time that I started writing the book, I spent most of a decade sitting with those feelings in various stages. Right after I came out I had very, very few other trans women in my life. Really no one who I was very close to. And that persisted for a couple of years; it was a very lonely, painful time for me. And I now know, looking back, that part of it was that my own self-loathing and my own issues with my body and the way that I move through the world was so intense that I could not handle the way I felt around other trans women. That my thoughts would kind of boil over, and I would start thinking like, “Oh, she’s doing such a better job being a woman than I am,” or I would feel really judgmental and be like, “Well, at least I don’t do *that* or look like *that*.” And those are all... they feel fuckin’ *horrible* to have those thoughts. And grace of god, over the last five or six years, I’ve gotten some therapy, I’ve done some drugs. And it’s helped. And I’ve been able to build a really strong, loving community around myself. And to participate in a real way and make those connections. And it felt important to honor that whole experience, because I know that there are people going through all stages of it right now. And I feel like it’s something we don’t talk about very much.

Tuck: Yeah. Well to that, the book switches perspectives so many times, bouncing between trans women, a trans guy, different cis women. I love that you did that; I think you did it so well, so artfully. Also as someone with ADHD, I thought this is my dream book. I can never lose focus, because there’s always a new place that we’re in. So I really loved that. But I was curious, who felt most natural to you to sort of bounce into their perspective, and who it maybe felt more challenging to write in their perspective?

Gretchen: The way that I approach writing, they’re not people to me. They’re characters in a book. They’re fictional, obviously. So it doesn’t typically depend on how closely I relate to that person, or how warmly I feel towards them. I would say that the only real challenge I had writing this was that I just fuckin’ hated learning and then figuring out how to explain medical procedures and terminology in a way that doesn’t sound like paint drying. So on that note, I would say that Indi was the hardest to write. Everything else, it came together pretty naturally. Fran was a little bit of a challenge, because I did not grow up with money, and I do not have the kind of body that she does, and so I had to kinda put myself through some unpleasant mental gymnastics. But that’s the job!

Tuck: You’ve said in interviews that you believe the TERFs in your book are much more generous than any real-life TERF you’ve met, which I agree with. But I was curious if you felt like you *needed* to give them more of a benefit of the doubt in order to give them more, to just make them more interesting characters, or what that process was like to decide to make them people that you could maybe be slightly sympathetic to in some cases? And if you feel like you got any, I don’t know, TERF insight, while doing that?

Gretchen: I think the main piece of insight I gleaned from this whole experience—which, it did involve a fair amount of research over and above the exposure I’d already had to TERFs and second-wave feminist touchstones like *The Transexual Empire*—they’re very stupid. And I know that others have said this better than I, but there’s just not much going on. Part of that is that they’re an incoherent group demographically at this point. It’s maybe more prominently like, evangelicals and conservative or liberal-conservative housewives, as it is anyone who would self-describe as a feminist, because of course you take a wedge issue like this that’s really hot-button socially and that has been so successfully connected to things like pedophilia by right-wing rhetoric, and you immediately get this crazy factionalism that draws in all kinds of bizarre participants. And I think that some TERFs have worked intentionally towards that, and most of them just kept bleating and screaming because that’s how they move through the world. I don’t think that these are people with much to say, with much insight to offer.

I think if I were to be really generous in assessing the real-world TERFs that I’ve known, they are profoundly fuckin’ broken and lonely. All they really have is giving themselves psychic wounds, and then showing those wounds in public and screaming about how horrible it is that they have to exist with this awful pain. Which is just exceptionally fuckin’ boring. When I was writing, I did have to make them more interesting and give them a sort of more visible humanity, because it would just fuckin’ suck to read about people who are as flat as the TERFs you see going around on the internet, or you know... who wants to read a book about Helen Joyce? That woman is the most tedious orator I’ve ever heard in my life. She couldn’t talk her way out of a parking ticket. And so you need to root them in human concerns, and of course these things exist in some form in the lives of real TERFs, but you don’t see them, because they haven’t connected those dots for themselves. They don’t understand how their pain and their loneliness and their feelings of rejection connect to the way that they spend their time. And in a book you have to at least have a sort of passive understanding that these thoughts occur next to each other. So it was a balancing act. You don’t want to make them seem sort of helpless or lacking agency in their own decisions, but you can’t just show the single-minded thuddingly dull-witted way that real TERFs act. It’s not interesting.

Tuck: That’s the thing, is you read like three TERF tweets, and you’re like, I’ve seen it all, and now I’m done. There’s nothing more to hear or learn from them.

Gretchen: No.

Tuck: [Sighs] Well, I’m sure you’ve been asked about this a lot, but a few months ago there was a big hullabaloo about this book *The Men*, which is like a kindergarten version of gender plague genre, like it’s so simplistic, the mechanic is just like everyone with a Y chromosome is pulled into hell for being evil. But when that Twitter discourse was happening, I talked to multiple people who had heard about your book but not read it, and heard about the discourse but not read it, and were like, “Oh, I saw people upset about a gendercide book and I thought it was Gretchen’s, and I was like how dare you! Gretchen’s book would never—this would never happen!” So anyway, you’re writing in a genre that also has all this weird, TERFy literature in it, and I was just hoping you would talk more about whether you feel like *Manhunt* is in conversation with those other gender plague texts, and what you think that conversation is?

Gretchen: I mean I am what I am, and I come from where I come from. I grew up in a town of 500 people, I’ve been sucking cocks in barns and getting in fist fights since I was 9 years old. Well, not the sucking cocks part, that waited until about 13 or 14, but getting in fights... [Tuck laughs] But I think no matter how abstracted it gets, that’s what *Manhunt* is. It’s taking this genre that is just so relentlessly simple and hateful and saying fuck you. Because these books are so uninteresting, they’re so unimaginative. I actually read and reviewed *The Men*, and people can believe or not believe this claim, but whenever I review something, I go in hoping to have a nice time. I would love to love something new. That is really the spice of my life in many ways. I *adore* finding a new favorite. That book is dogshit. Just unbelievably, and the transphobia wasn’t even really the thing that threw me. I mean it’s bad, but it’s run-of-the-mill bad. That book is *crazy* racist. Like bananas racist, like *so* weirdly anti-Black.

Ozzy: Well, it’s like, scratch a transphobe, find a racist, right?

Gretchen: Oh, for sure.

Tuck: That’s the thing, people love to, when no one is overtly talking about race but is talking about gender, find a way to say something overtly racist. And it’s like, we were not even talking about that!

Gretchen: Yeah, you fully dragged that dead cat in on your own. I think the thing about TERFism that so many people have sort of forgotten due to sheer dint of repetition of the discussions involved, is that it stems from the British English ideals of gender and sexuality, which were imported during colonialism. It’s the same programs that led to residential schools and to the re-education of indigenous people all over the world. These are bloody, coercive, horrible tools of social control, and are designed to intentionally break down entire cultures into digestible chunks. The British way of understanding gender and sexuality is destructive, inherently. And people are uncritically repurposing the same way of understanding these things, and the same system of enforcing that understanding that colonized half the planet. I mean, it’s just, you’d get kicked out of a writing room for putting it in a TV show.

Tuck: That’s the thing, it’s the same as the TERF thing. So much that we’re working with, it’s too on the nose for fiction.

Gretchen: Exactly. Like it’s obvious these nice middle-aged women have picked up Nazism and made it about wombs. Great. [Sighs]

Tuck: [Laughs] Yeah, yep. Well, we were talking to Imogen [Binnie] a couple weeks ago on the show, and she said something about how horror for her felt like a way to force herself to feel something after being used to dissociating all the time. For trans reasons, trauma reasons. Is that something that resonates with you?

Gretchen: Absolutely, absolutely. Like any good transexual, I’ve spent a good chunk of my life dissociated. And horror, people often compare it to a roller coaster or to S&M, I think those are both apt. It’s a way to sort of give yourself an injection of this extreme sensation in a setting where you’re not gonna get killed. And in my experience, it has helped me to be more open to things like being in crowds, being around loud noises, and being around momentary threats, for instance, if you’re at a march or something. Horror has really opened me back up to myself in a lot of ways.

Ozzy: Yeah, I actually want to ask something related to that, which is, I’ve heard you talk in some other interviews about how *Manhunt* involves a lot of your own fears, like the T-rex virus kind of as a metaphor for the fear of having access to HRT cut off, and I’ve also heard you talk about how you really don’t like the idea of being trapped underground, which reminded me a lot of Robbie’s internal dialogue/monologue in the book, when they’re in the underground bunker. I’m just curious if that’s how you usually approach your horror fiction, like writing about what scares you personally, and why you think that works for you?

Gretchen: Well, I think people respond to honesty. I’ll tell you something that my favorite ex used to say to me all the time when we were watching a scary movie. They would get super high, and he would turn and look at me, the minute something horrible happened on screen, and he would say with these big puppy-dog eyes, “I would hate it if that happened to me.” [Tuck and Ozzy laugh] You know, like, Hooper’s down in the cage in *Jaws* and the shark’s banging on the bars and he’s just like, “I would hate it if that happened to me.” And I was like, “I know baby, I think most people would.” But when you stop theorizing and bandying around academic terms, that’s really the root of horror. Show me something that I don’t want to have happen to me! And I think that if you can find those buttons and pedals on people and hammer on them, that’s the start of a good experience, and the best and most reliable way to find them is to find your own.

Ozzy: Yeah, totally.

Tuck: Well on a similar note, you did this book launch event with Carmen Maria Machado, and in it you said, “I think the best way you can write an honest and beautiful and open sex scene is to consider everything you’ve ever thought and haven’t said while you were having sex,” which I love and wrote down, and then saw Carmen also love and write down. But I have sex questions, because I know, I talked to Carmen recently, I was talking to her about your book and other books, and she was saying that the books she was most excited about these days are both like horny and scary, right? So I was thinking about horny/scary, scary/horny, and how reading this book, *Manhunt*, those feelings like really started blurring together in my body, because you’re flipping so fast between horny, scary, horny, scary, and I’m like, “What’s happening, and why do I feel horny while people are getting murdered? What’s going on?” I’m sure that was kind of your intent, but I would love to just hear your thoughts on fear and arousal, kind of how they can work together or work in general.

Gretchen: I mean, I think they’re the same thing. Porn and horror are the two most physically oriented genres. You’re trying to get a very specific response out of the reader. One, get them off, or two, frighten them, make them anxious. Put them into fight or flight. And a lot of those buttons are identical, you know, you think of the modern fad of monster fucking—the appeal and the threat are the same thing. And I think that’s true for a lot of human sexuality, especially deviant sexuality, kink and all that good stuff. Because the thing you want would not be appealing if it weren’t forbidden. And when you’re in that kind of a space, it’s very easy to hit both buttons at once. It’s kind of hard to avoid it, in fact. So when you start to write about things like sex between non-normative bodies, sex between fat people, disabled people, you start to press these really raw nerves. Everyone has really intense feelings about those things. And it’s usually some mixture of excitement and revulsion. I love doing it, because it really gets a rise out of people, and because I think it’s hot. You know, there’s a great tweet that I’m always thinking about, which is, “I’ve put a lot of work into becoming a professional movie critic, but really the only thing I care about is whether or not there’s a lady in the movie who gets blood all over her mouth and screams. [Everyone laughs] And like, that’s it for me, that’s why I want to go to the movies. And that’s all that that conflation is.

Tuck: Yeah, I want to talk a little more about what you were talking about with non-normative bodies having sex—trans, queer, disabled, fat, because this book is full of sex. I guess a lot of it is kink? I have like a long sort of running bit with my friends about what counts as kink. So I, in my head, was like this is what sex is, and also these are the people that I would have sex with. And so none of it registered as like freaky-deaky to me? And then I saw some tweets where you said people were like, “Why are they all spitting on each other and stuff?!” [Gretchen laughs] And so I was like, oh right, it actually is so wild to see that representation, you’re doing #representation by writing kinky sex scenes between trans and fat and disabled people. And I just didn’t register it because it was like, finally a sex scene that felt familiar, right? So I was like okay, sure, yeah.

Gretchen: That’s how it felt to me.

Tuck: Okay, that’s what I was gonna ask, is did you feel like you were like, I’m gonna write some kinky-ass shit for everyone, or were you like, this is what sex is to me, and so I put it in here?

Gretchen: Yeah, that’s literally it. And I do think that the spitting thing—the reaction to that took me by surprise. People are so intense about it. And you know, I’m with you. When I was writing it, I was like, “Well all right, that’s sex. At some point someone’s gonna spit in someone else’s mouth, that’s completely normal.” People have very strong opinions about it, it turns out! I wish them well. Their sex lives sound terrible. [Laughs]

Tuck: I do remember in early pandemic being like, “We’re all gonna spit in each other’s mouths, that’s gonna be like the ultimate kink.” [Gretchen laughs] But apparently not. [Sighs]

Gretchen: No, no, I think we went the other way.

Tuck: Rude.

Gretchen: It really is, it’s extremely transphobic.

Tuck: It really is. So also speaking of this, I think, you said, and I don’t know where you said it but I wrote it down, “Aside from *Anguish*, there’s hardly any fat bodies in horror that are not one-off jokes or objects of revulsion, and I think fatness is such a rich territory for horror stories.” I would love to hear more about that. It also reminded me of how transness is such rich territory for horror stories because of like, body horror, and I was wondering if it felt similar to you, or if that’s a completely different thing.

Gretchen: No, they feel very adjacent. I think my experience as both a fat woman and a trans woman, these are both ways that you are forced into constant, sometimes involuntary intimacy with your own body. You think about social phenomena like body checks, where women will assess their own appearance every 15 seconds in a certain environment, and maybe more or less often depending on who’s around them. We’ll even do it when we’re alone, because body image issues are so pervasive and so broadly encouraged. And when you start to layer things on top of that way of constructing womanhood, it becomes progressively more intense. I also have a disease called body dysmorphic disorder, which causes me to fixate on real or perceived flaws in my appearance, to the point that I begin to hallucinate their exaggeration. And I’ll experience things like believing my skin is rotting, or that I have abscesses somewhere I can’t see. So my experience in life, especially when that has been less well treated than it is now, has been one of really constant inescapable contact, not just with my body, but with the knowledge that my body is actively revolting to society and to the people around me. I don’t know what’s scarier than that. You are your own I-have-no-mouth-and-I-must-scream scenario.

Tuck: Well, I guess like, while we’re kind of speaking about body horror and kink, a little bit of a tangent, but you’re also a movie critic, and you very recently reviewed *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*, and you called it one of the most important documentaries ever made. And I wanted to hear more about why you felt that way.

Gretchen: Well, for one thing I think that it is this touchstone of continuity in sort of the freak and outlier community. And like I said in my review, it’s very rare that we get raised by our own people. Queer people are all sort of cuckoo birds laid in someone else’s nest, and very often we’re treated like it. And so for me and many people that I know, these influential figures can feel as much or more like a parent than your actual flesh and blood parents do. I have a friend of mine who often talks about feeling like Martin Scorsese has been more formative to her than her dad, with whom she has a very strange, difficult connection. I said, for years as a joke, “My biological father David Cronenberg,” before I realized that I kinda meant it. [Tuck laughs] And I think that *Sick* not only captures its moment in outsider kink and freak art, but it ties it inextricably to one of the most overlooked political blocks in America, and one of the most accomplished political blocks in America, which is the disabled. To watch Bob Flanagan make this absolute fuckin’ bonfire out of his own death, and show himself at his worst and his weakest and his least appealing, it feels like the good, cathartic version of the moment when you beat your dad at chess. That passing of a torch. And I think that especially in America, we desperately need to be reacquainted with intimacy with death. We need to have that experience throughout our lives. And for him to use his own life as material to give us that experience is deeply moving to me. I don’t think I’ve ever in my life cried harder than I did during that documentary. And I was watching it with a lover of mine who is a trans pornographer, and just feeling this really intense connection to these absolute fuckin’ weirdos of yesteryear who were there doing what we’re doing now, with maybe not less of, but a different kind of safety net, socially speaking. And also to see this man who was world famous for being a freak, seeing him just fearlessly go out and mentor young people. That was really moving to me.

Tuck: Yeah, I was really fascinated by that part of your review, where you were saying that he worked with teens. Like, imagine him doing that now.

Gretchen: Yeah, it would be an immediate scandal all over the world. But he, I mean, if you talked to any kid who went through the CF camp where he worked, he was a really important part of their lives.

Ozzy: Yeah, well you mentioned David Cronenberg, and that just made me think about a question I wanted to ask you, which is about horror movies that are secretly trans but aren’t trans cult classics yet. Like I’m thinking maybe about the *Videodrome* that every trans person isn’t already obsessed with, like not necessarily overtly about gender, but maybe has some other themes of social isolation or things that can have trans themes read onto it. Yeah, I’m just curious if you have anything to recommend, in like the trans horror/can be read as trans horror genre?

Gretchen: Absolutely. I think probably my all-time favorite of Cronenberg’s specifically for trans interpretation is *Dead Ringers*, which is about twin gynecologists, both played by Jeremy Irons, one of whom is named Beverly. And they have this quasi-incestuous relationship with each other where they share women, and the only women that Beverly has been with are the women that Elliot has been with first. There’s a great scene where Beverly absolutely explodes at the suggestion that he has a woman’s name. It’s intensely, like fanatically focused on effeminacy and femininity, you know, of course these are people who spend their entire adult lives obsessing over the minutiae of the internal reproductive system. It’s just so fuckin’ gay, and so trans. I love it so much. I also thought his recent movie *Crimes of the Future*, which is all about sort of the politics and the epistemology around body modification and self-surgery, lends itself very, very well to trans interpretation. And then of course you’ve got your classic transformation movies, *American Werewolf in London*, *Cat People*, both the original and the Paul Schrader remake from the 80’s, which is absolutely fucking insane, which all play around with the central metaphor of transformation into an unacceptable social monster.

Tuck: Okay well speaking of movies, I just wanted to check in, because we know *Manhunt* is in its what, 6th printing now? 7th printing?

Gretchen: Yeah, 6th.

Tuck: And you’re such as cinematic writer, which I assume comes from having seen and reviewed thousands of films. But like, it’s just very, very easy to imagine *Manhunt* as a film, and I just was gonna check in to see if there’s any talk about a *Manhunt* movie, TV show, or you doing any other movie/TV show.

Gretchen: Well, keep your ears open. That’s about all I can say right now.

Tuck: Okay, great!

Gretchen: It’s not out of the realm of possibility.

Tuck: Great, well, you were talking about this cuckoo bird metaphor a little bit earlier, and I was like oh, I could segue so beautifully into what else you’re working on, and then I missed it. But can you talk about what else you’re working on, *Cuckoo* and anything else?

Gretchen: Absolutely, I just turned in my draft of *The Cuckoo*, which is gonna be my second novel, and it’s a conversion camp therapy story about a group of queer teens who in the 90’s are sent off to Utah to this tough-love camp. And when they get there, they gradually begin to realize that someone is replacing the kids around them, they’re being copied, and that the copies are well-behaved and straight and immaculate. So I just turned that in, and I’m working on my third novel right now, *Mommy*, which is about intergenerational dyke relationships. It’s a piece of witch horror, cannibal horror, it’s set during the worst winter on record in Worcester, Massachusetts, and it stars this cast of dykes from 20 to 80.

Tuck: As soon as you said *Mommy*, I remembered that that was the second half of one of the tweets about the *Manhunt* sex, is you were like, “People were weirded out by the sex in *Manhunt*,” and you’re like, “Get ready!” [Both laugh]

Gretchen: Truly, suck it.

Tuck: I’m so excited, *The Cuckoo* is like exactly what I want to read, I’m so thrilled, and I’m so excited about *Mommy* as well, now that I know what it is. Well, I guess, speaking of your writing, you also have this Patreon that is mostly movie reviews, but you’ve also done some other writing as well that feels really important to me. And so I was reading something you wrote on there, and it made me feel like you’re a good person to ask this to, but also if you’re like I don’t want to fuck with this, that’s fine. But there’s this weird societal trend that I think is particularly in queer world, but not exclusive to queer world, where people feel like they’re not allowed to just dislike something or someone. Like I can’t just be like, “That movie isn’t for me,” it’s like, “This is harmful, it is abusive, it is disturbing, it’s dangerous to me...”

Gretchen: “...and honestly, I wouldn’t want to be around *anyone* who thinks this is an okay way to represent....” Yeah.

Tuck: Exactly, and I was just thinking about it, as someone who, as I said, doesn’t watch a lot of horror, but I wouldn’t be like, “And the people who do deserve to go to prison!” You know, like I just don’t do well metabolizing that, and that’s fine. And sometimes I watch it, and sometimes I don’t. But I was just wondering, because you’ve done some really good writing about this, and about like whether art can be dangerous, or how often art that we call dangerous is dangerous, or what that would mean. And I was just wondering if you were willing to talk a little bit more about that.

Gretchen: Yeah, I think when we call art dangerous, what we almost always mean is that it made us uncomfortable. Because art can’t hurt you. On an individual level, art can’t rape you, it can’t kill you, it can’t shoot you. These are things which even the most deranged person on the internet would be forced to concede art cannot do. So to call art dangerous, you have to get into this abstract realm where you’re talking about a handful of propaganda films throughout history, say *Birth of a Nation*, or *Triumph of the Will*. And I think that often, people form this simplistic idea that when these movies were released they created this groundswell of hatred and violence. And I would say that my entire education as both a critic and historian suggests that what these movies did was *acknowledge* an already extant groundswell. And that they were merely an outgrowth of things that already existed. Which makes them no less monstrous! But it also plants the onus, the responsibility for these social movements that have been so horrendous and destructive, back on the people who actually composed them. And not on some asshole documentarian looking to make a buck off a bunch of hay seeds.

So I think that even in its most extreme manifestations, when the film really is just beyond question, just a hateful piece of agitprop that is designed to get people fired up and make them commit a fuckin’ hate crime... even then, the art is not doing the harm. This is bad actors taking the horns of angry, impressionable, weak-willed people, and directing them away from the things that are actually causing their lives to be unstable and out of their control, and towards the people who are weaker and more vulnerable than them, which is a classic splitting tactic. And I think when we talk about horror, when someone says, “Well, this book is harmful because it portrays a hurtful stereotype,” or, “it uses this particular plot formulation that people have decided has created stereotypes.” First of all, this is pretty impossible to determine without a hundred years of hindsight, so a lot of it you sort of have to sweep off the bench right at the start. But even for situations where you do have a huge literary history to draw on, I just don’t think there’s a defensible case to be made that a book that made you upset is automatically harmful in some way.

As a reader, as a cinephile and professional critic, there’ve been plenty of times in my career that I’ve been triggered by something, and I haven’t always handled it perfectly, but one thing I’ve never done is gone online and screamed at a stranger about it. I find that if you log off and go lie down in a dark room with a cloth over your eyes, it passes pretty quickly. [Laughs] I think that people feel very threatened when they’re made to be responsible for their own emotions, or when they are shown or told that perhaps there’s value in things that they consider frightening and that they don’t want to touch. They get very defensive. They get very angry. And I can’t change their minds. There’s not much that I can do about the way that they react to art. The only real impact it has on the way that I work, is that it’s a huge fuckin’ drag every once in a while. Some of them will grow out of it; some of them won’t. Like I said, I’m a student of history from way back, and we have so much surviving text from ancient Rome, and there’s such a depressing amount of it that is like, “This play is promoting loose morals in our women.” And it’s just like, oh my god, nothing fuckin’ changes. [Sighs] Idiots are idiots.

Tuck: Yeah, I don’t know if I’ve even thought about it through that lens, but now, yeah that makes sense, it’s just an extension of what people have always done. [Sighs] Well, Ozzy, you have anything else you want to ask?

Ozzy: I guess I just have one more thing, which I don’t know if you’ll have anything particularly else to say about, but I think last month you tweeted, “I highly recommend being a slut, eating whatever you want, and doing cool drugs.” And I was just like, I agree, and would you like to elaborate on this life philosophy at all?

Gretchen: Yeah, I mean I think that these are all forms of connection with yourself and with the world, and we live in this moralistic society grown out of the twin pillars of capitalism and puritanism. Both of which reward retention, in various forms. Horde your resources, be frugal, acquire lots of things, and to me, this is a very joyless, dry way to live. I’m no fan of the Catholic Church, but I will say this for them over Protestantism, they know how to build a church, they know how to throw a party, they know how to make a spectacle. And we need more of that in our lives, we need to waste more shit. We need to eat more dessert, we need to do things that feel good, and have the sex that we want to have and not the sex we feel we should be having. I don’t really think of myself as like a libertine or a hedonist in any kind of political way, I guess there are people who would describe me that way, but I do think it’s very important that we teach ourselves how to do things that rule, even if they’re not like responsible use of finances or whatever. Like go spend 60 bucks on mushrooms, you’re not gonna regret it! [Everyone laughs]

Ozzy: So true, I love that so fucking much, thank you for sharing.

Gretchen: My pleasure.

Tuck: I think 60 bucks on mushrooms is just an investment in your wellbeing and your future.

Gretchen: Absolutely.

Tuck: I’ve been doing interviews this month where people are like, “How do you celebrate Pride, what does Pride mean to you?” And I’m like, “Bitch, I don’t know, I’m working, like there’s a pandemic, I don’t know.” But I will now pass this annoying question onto you—do you have any positive or negative or neutral feelings about pride?

Gretchen: I’m gay every day. [Laughs]

Tuck: Right, exactly.

Gretchen: No... I don’t like parades. I’m not wild about crowds. The public sex is nice, it’s nice to see a bunch of hot people out around. Other than that, throw a brick at a cop. That’s what I have to say about Pride.

Tuck: Wait, this is amazing, because you don’t listen to the show, right, like at all?

Gretchen: I don’t, I don’t listen to podcasts.

Tuck: That’s what I thought, okay, so every single episode that is released during any month of June since the beginning of the podcast, the signoff changes to become, “Throw a brick at a cop.” [Gretchen laughs] Like those exact words. So that’s why I had to double check, cause I was like, okay, I’m just making sure you don’t know about this.

Gretchen: That’s so funny.

Tuck: That’s what we do.

Gretchen: Great minds, man.

Tuck: Exactly. Well, the way we always end the show is by asking in an ideal world, what would the future of gender look like?

Gretchen: No more discourse, that’s it. Just everyone stop giving a shit. Please. [Everyone laughs]

[Gender Reveal theme music plays]

Tuck: That’s gonna do it for this show. If you had a good time or learned something, please share this episode with your friends and community. You can find Gretchen on Twitter @scumbelievable and at Patreon.com/scumbelievable. We are @gendereveal and at genderpodcast.com, where you can find transcripts of every episode among other resources. If you like what we do here at Gender Reveal, please consider supporting the show at patreon.com/gender. By signing up, you’ll automatically get access to our weekly newsletter and our monthly bonus podcast, among other perks. We’ve also got all kinds of good merch in the store this month, with proceeds split between trans artists and trans organizations. Take a look at everything before it’s gone at bit.ly/gendermerch.

This episode was produced and edited by Ozzy Linas Goodman and by me, Tuck Woodstock. Our logo is by Ira M. Leigh. Our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder. Additional music this week by Blue Dot Sessions. We’ll be back next week with more feelings about gender. Throw a brick at a cop.

[Gender Reveal theme music ends]

Tuck: This is a side note, but Mattie Lubchansky put out a comic this morning that was talking about gender, like TERF stuff, and then there was like a Nazi popping up, and they were like, they had to turn off the comments immediately cause all the comments were like, “How *dare* you compare Nazis to blah blah blah blah, when it’s like, okay...”

Gretchen: Yeah, the Nazis who famously had no opinions about transexuals. [Tuck laughs] I think, if I recall, Adolf Eichmann was on record as saying, “Gender is a continuum! I am but an explorer on a vast ocean!” [Everyone laughs]