**Tuck:** Shopping for sex toys can sometimes feel overwhelming or dysphoric, but shopenby.com aims to create a better experience for the queer, trans, and gender nonconforming community. You need lube, they’ve got lube. You need a vibrating butt plug with a rainbow unicorn tail, they’ve got that too. Two percent of all proceeds are donated to organizations focused on improving the lives of queer and trans people of color. Visit shopenby.com—that’s shopenby.com—and use the code GenderReveal at checkout to get 10% off and support the show.

[Gender Reveal theme music starts]

**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, it is a joy and a privilege to share my conversation with Jackie Ess, who you hopefully already know as the author of *Darryl*. In *Darryl*, Jackie writes from the perspective of a cis…? white guy, and in this interview, we talk about why she chose to do that as someone who is neither cis nor white.

**Jackie [voice clip]:** For me, the kind of irony there is I’m like, this is the way that I think that people wanted me to write about my own identity. And I’m like, “No, no, but I’ll give you the voice.”

**Tuck:** We also talk about maintaining privacy as an author, doing bits, and also Jonathan Franzen and Jack Harlow for some reason.

**Jackie [voice clip]:** And of course, I want to be the industry baby.

**Tuck:** But before we get to that, I just wanted to let you know that we did put a ton of stuff in the merch store for this month only. We’ve got a very powerful new design that says, “Gender is a Shitty Group Project,” we’ve got three beautiful new floral stickers in various pride flag colors, and we’ve got two new designs from our cartoonist friend Will, who you might know as @transplantcomics on Instagram. Plus, we’re rerunning some of our biggest hits, including our “Surf, Don’t TERF” tanks and hoodies, and our famous “Trains Flag” mug. This is all available through November 30 only at bit.ly/gendermerch. Again, that is through the end of November only—don’t ask for it later—at bit.ly/gendermerch, and as always 100% of proceeds go to trans people and trans organizations. And now it’s time for This Week in Gender.

[Transition sound effect, with low metallic chimes and hi-hats plays briefly]

**Tuck:** You may remember that in last week’s episode, Britni de la Cretaz and I talked briefly about the experience of trans nonbinary athletes and the 2020 Olympics. After that episode came out, we got a DM from a listener named Logan, who is @wolverine.on.wheels on Instagram, and that DM said, “Hey! I just listened to the most recent episode and noticed that you didn’t talk about the Paralympics. I understand that you might not have felt comfortable because you lacked education and information about the Paralympics, but it would be really interesting to talk about trans and disabled athletes, since disabled athletes spend longer times, well into adulthood, in co-ed sports. Most parasports are co-ed until the Paralympic level.”

[Gentle tones begin playing in the background]

And Logan is right in that I do lack information and education about the Paralympics and parasports. So once again, I am going to tell you something in this segment that I learned from some Googling, but I want to stress that I’m not a great source on this and both Britni and I are going to be doing more research going forward.

And, to be honest, this was unusually difficult to research because the vast majority of athletics coverage on this topic, like our podcast last week, leaves out parasports entirely. For example, I read that not only are many parasports co-ed until the Paralympic level, but the Paralympics themselves have historically been ahead of the Olympics in allowing mixed-gender teams. So I tried to learn more about this, but 95% of the articles I found only talked about the new mixed-gender events at the Olympics in 2018 and 2020.

[Gentle background tones fade out]

I did find this 2016 article from *Stylist* in the UK which says, quote, “Compared to sporting bodies such as the Football Association, Rugby Football Union, and even the International Olympic Committee, the Paralympics is powering ahead when it comes to gender equality. While the Olympics has mixed equestrian, badminton, and tennis, the Paralympics allows mixed teams in everything from rowing, archery, cycling, and tennis to shooting and bocce.”

Since that article was published, both the Olympics and Paralympics have added additional mixed-gender events. And not to do a tangent about Olympic mixed-gender events for a second, but I am going to do a tangent for a second because all of these new co-ed events are being held up in media coverage as some kind of amazing innovation of gender equality. But as the *Wall Street Journal* puts it, “They are less battle of the sexes than a kind of athletic square dance, putting men and women in tandem without putting them in direct solo competition with one another,” unquote.

[Gentle tones begin playing in the background]

Some of the sports like curling and table tennis do have people of different genders working together on the same team at the same time. Others, like the mixed relays and swimming and track and field, have people of different genders competing against each other head to head, but there are strict rules that each team needs to have two men and two women. You know, the two genders? And then in other sports, particularly in the Winter Olympics, it’s basically like, “Okay, we’re gonna have a bunch of men compete against each other, then a bunch of women compete against each other, and whoever has the fastest combined time wins,” which I would argue doesn’t really say much of anything about equality. I could run a relay with a baby; it wouldn’t imply that the baby and I have equal athletic prowess.

[Gentle background tones fade out]

Anyway, something that the Paralympics has that as far as I know the Olympics does not have is truly mixed-gender sports like wheelchair rugby, in which as far as I could find there are no rules or quotas about gender configurations on the teams. This seemingly would create the most possible space for trans and particularly nonbinary athletes to compete without issue. But in practice the teams skew extremely cis-guy-heavy. In this year’s Paralympics, only four of the eight competing teams included a single woman on their roster, let alone anyone trans. That’s not to say that trans Paralympians didn’t and don’t exist. There were three out nonbinary competitors in the 2020 Summer Paralympics, including 50-year-old Australian Maz Strong, who won a bronze shot put medal, 24-year-old Australian wheelchair racer Robyn Lambird, who also won a bronze medal, and American rower Laura Goodkind, who didn’t win any medals but—I thought this was interesting—describes their gender as “neutral, because I want to affirm what and who I am as opposed to what I am not.”

[Gentle tones begin playing in the background]

Really, I should stop talking about the Paralympics and instead talk about parasports in general. For example, wheelchair basketball, which is one of the world’s oldest parasports, is, according to Logan, the only parasport that has a trans inclusion policy in the United States and Canada. So I’m looking at a copy of this trans inclusion policy by Wheelchair Basketball Canada, which we will link to in the show notes, and it seems…good? Like, I feel like I am missing something. But it says that at both recreational and competitive levels, trans athletes may participate in their expressed and identified gender category and are not required to disclose their trans history or identity to Wheelchair Basketball Canada or any coaches or staff. They’re also allowed to abstain from indicating a gender identity at all. And I don’t know how that works in practice, but I love an undisclosed gender. Anyway, in the policy, Wheelchair Basketball Canada also pledges to use everyone’s name and pronouns, to allow athletes to use facilities that correspond with their gender, and to make sure that uniforms and dress codes respect everyone’s gender identity and expression. And all of that seems like an extremely low bar, but compared to the hell zone that is most trans sports discourse right now, it seems good. Right?

[Gentle background tones fade out]

Thank you again to Logan for suggesting this topic. If you, listener, know anything about gender and inclusion in parasports and want to correct or add anything, please feel free to reach out.

In the meantime, this has been This Week in Gender.

[Transition sound effect, with low metallic chimes and hi-hats plays briefly]

[Gender Reveal theme music excerpt fades in]

**Tuck:** Jackie Ess is a writer across forums, but as much as possible, a novelist. Mid-thirties, nice, normal, loves to laugh, walks on the beach, compatible with all signs. *Darryl* is her first novel of hopefully many. She lives in Atlantic Canada with her partner and truly amazing dog.

[Gender Reveal theme music excerpt fades out]

**Tuck:** In terms of gender, how do you describe yourself?

**Jackie:** Yeah, I say trans woman. I use she/her pronouns. I always think that probably there’s some private complication with that, but I haven’t found really much of a voice for it. So.

**Tuck:** Yeah. So your novel is set in Eugene, Oregon, and having grown up in that area, Darryl feels really recognizable to me as like this really specific type of white person that exists in large numbers here. My friend described it as, like, “live, laugh, love racism,” like someone who’s really confident that he’s an ally, and that obliviousness is part of the harm. So I know you were living in Eugene when you started writing this book, but I’m curious if that specific type of Oregon white person played a role in setting the book there or shaping the character there.

**Jackie:** Oh, yeah. I had just moved to Eugene, lived in Eugene for like, around a year. And I got there right around the time that Trump was elected. I think that there was a lot of anxiety about like this kind of, sort of like a rising tide moment for the white supremacist sort of movement. And it was very visible in Eugene. And I mean, not very visible in a very organized way, but visible in the sense that, you know, kind of hooliganism was on the rise, and that was a frightening thing to me, certainly. So you know, you talk about the “live, laugh, love” racism, et cetera. And like, of course, I had seen that because I had grown up in Seattle, in the Bay Area. And so I kind of had the flavor of the kind of West Coast peculiar denial of its history. You know, for example, that there was, it was a hate crime in the early nineties, the murder of Hattie Mae Cohens and Brian Mock by skinheads. This happened in the early nineties; the Lesbian Avengers famously kind of put up a memorial for them. That’s probably part of why so much of the world knows about them.

Also, because this was at the time when hate crime legislation was sort of kind of on everybody’s mind, and there was a big question as to whether to include sexual orientation. That had been a topic that I had always taken a lot of interest in. And I was interested in the conversations that I was having with people who seemed not to remember that history or not to have been taught it or anything like that. And so I was in Eugene, and kind of without a lot to do, you know, I had a partner who was a student who was finishing her PhD at the time. And so it was like, I was either gonna go and hang out with the philosophers or I was gonna stay home and write, and so I wrote a lot. But it’s very much kind of a product of that place. And I felt like, actually, you know, like, I had moved there from New York. And I felt like in a way, like getting out of New York sort of let me write. I thought, I kind of thought like, “Oh, right, I found my Gloucester, Massachusetts, I found my Winesburg, Ohio,” or something like that. Like I kind of did have a little bit of an aspiration to be like, “Oh, I’m going to write this kind of like *Twin Peaks*-y thing.” And it turned out not to go that way, right? Because it’s like so much in this one character’s head. That’s just been kind of the voice I’m stuck on, maybe because I come out of, you know, lyric poetry or something. Because I’m an argumentative Twitter poster or something like that, you know?

**Tuck:** Well, speaking of really being in this one character’s head, Darryl has a really distinct voice as a character. And I really love the book, but I did have to take it in chunks even though it’s short, because I would get overwhelmed by being in Darryl’s head for too long. So I’m curious what it was like to be in Darryl’s head on and off for years and whether inhabiting that character ever felt intense for you.

**Jackie:** Oh, yeah. But I mean, it’s worth saying that I love doing characters, I like doing bits; I like doing voices, I like putting on accents, et cetera. And that was actually kind of how I find a lot of my characters, is that I’ll sort of start doing a bit and I’ll think like, “Oh, wait, no, let’s kind of go past the bit and say, like, so who is this person?” And I kind of feel like, you know, characters kind of come into my imagination, and then I sort of follow them home. And I think that that was kind of how it had gone with *Darryl*. There are places where it gets pretty disturbing, and I don’t know that they’re necessarily the obvious places, right? Like, there are places where Darryl says things that resonate with me. There are places where characters who are not Darryl say things that resonate with me. And there have definitely been—I’ve definitely had experiences, like I’ve had this with my most recent book, like I just am at the point where I’m kind of thinking now’s the time to try to publish it. You know, I’ve gone through a few drafts of it. It’s with some early readers; I’m going to send it to my agents and all that, you know, do that whole dance. It really didn’t feel ready, but part of the reason why I didn’t feel ready was that there were some parts of it that I honestly felt like I couldn’t edit without kind of hyperventilating. It was just like, “Oh, this kind of triggers me, actually.” And when that happens, it really raises a question for me of like, “Okay, do you know what you’re doing here? Is this worth it?” You know, like, if you have some, you know, kind of trauma-related issue and you go to a therapist, are they gonna say just like, “Just brutally grimly face it down!”? And like, that’s actually not very good advice for most people. It’s not very good advice for me.

So, I’ve kind of had to negotiate with that idea sometimes, where it’s like, okay, if this is a really intense section for me, that I have to kind of walk away from and come back to 100 times while I’m editing it, just to make sure that I really am okay with writing it this way or having, you know, having it play out this way, then it’s like, okay, well, a reader doesn’t actually have that kind of choice, right? And actually a lot of readers have, I would say, a really goody-two-shoes attitude, right? Like I talk to people where they’re like, “I feel so guilty if I don’t finish a book.” *Really?* Nobody’s holding you to it. In fact, those are the worst readers, because if somebody is really feeling like it’s so grim, and they hate it so much, it’s like, come on, put it down, go read something that’s fun for you. Like, there are books that people love that did nothing for me, and it is not an insult to the author. It’s not my failure or something like that.

And, you know, perhaps we could maybe all aspire to have open hearts and open eyes or something like that, but there’s limits. And so I had this whole discipline like when I was passing it out to early readers, one of the biggest things that I would try to assure them of is I would say, “Look, if this turns you off, stop reading it, put it down, but tell me that you did that. That’s all I want. But I really really do not want to hear that you started forcing yourself through the book on page 60 and then, you know, on page 120, you’re like, ‘Oh, well, I mean, I think that you kind of switched tenses here,’” you know. You get that kind of advice from people, and they think they’re being good students or something like that. And it’s like, “Oh, that’s actually not the kind of response that I’m interested in.” There are obviously people who I really trust with kind of craft advice, but I find it kind of repellent most of the time, right? Like usually, I’m just like, “No, no, play your position. Like if you’re an early reader, be a reader, be a reader. That’s what I want. I just want you to read the book. Tell me how that goes. And if you don’t like it, you know”—and I actually feel that way about late readers, too. You know, if somebody buys the book, I hope that they have a good time. A few people seem to have had a good time.

**Tuck:** [laughs]A few people. Yeah. When you’re writing *Darryl* or writing in general, do you have a specific audience that you’re imagining writing for, or a specific reader?

**Jackie:** Not really, I mean, I feel like I have ideas of that that change all the time. And there’s actually marks in *Darryl* of where I was completely wrong about it. Because I think that when I wrote *Darryl* I was kind of coming out of a certain trans lit milieu. I had known all the Topside Press people and I was kind of around New York around that time. And I had a lot of anxieties about, “I’m going to be read as a representative of my identities.” You know, it’s like, “Oh, no, this is going to be like the representative trans woman of color book, and then people are going to be really pissed off that it’s bad at that.” And so writing *Darryl* was like, oh my god, this is so freeing, because nobody could ever confuse it with that, you know. I’ve put my burden down and I can actually write—not because I’m uninterested in those topics, by the way, but it’s just like, I needed to be sure that I was writing fiction in a way.

And I was really concerned about that. And it was also like seeing how my book was going to fit into what I had imagined to be like, kind of a distinct genre of trans literature. And I kind of imagined a world where everybody who’s read my book has definitely read *Nevada*, they’ve definitely read *A Safe Girl to Love* and blah, blah, blah. And it’s like, well, that’s actually not true. I would be very happy for more people to read those books. But I think that increasingly, those books are seen as having their own particular concerns, not speaking for the entire concept of what trans people can do. And it’s a wonderful relief that that’s true, right? I mean, because I think that that burden was too much. And it, you know, caused a lot of us to pull out way too much of our hair. Just when we’re trying to grow it out, right? [Tuck laughs]

And actually, recently, I was totally inspired when I read an early copy of Casey Plett’s new book, which I think is awesome. And I was like, you know what? The concept of trans literature that I was kind of a little concerned about, this perfects it. Because I never had a problem with that genre, I just knew that I couldn’t write it. And then I was like, “Am I so sure that I can’t write it?” And I started writing it. And so now I have these short stories that I’ve been working on that I basically—Casey Plett really made this writing possible, completely. Without that the book wouldn’t be happening.

And so maybe that’ll be a third book, you know, like, the second novel is probably a little bit more like *Darryl*;probably a little bit more hardcore than *Darryl* in a lot of ways, just in the sense of having a less naïve and perhaps less bumpkinish narrator. Darryl has a way of—he kind of coarsens himself. He has this kind of folksiness, and he’s always happy to just kind of fold himself over. He doesn’t really want to fight anybody. And I think you know, the guy, Adam, who’s the narrator of my next book, is somebody who’s a little bit more convinced, you know. He’s a secular meditation teacher with some attitude. You know, he’s a very convinced guy. And so when he says things that are wrong, it’s going to feel a little bit different than when Darryl does it, right? Like Darryl doesn’t get it, but he’s always kind of operating from this position of very tryhard, kind of like this position of compassionate misunderstanding. You know, he’s a very liberal guy, he kind of thinks that we should all be able to get along, and he’s certain that ultimately we do agree. He doesn’t believe that conflict exists. Even as he, you know, says occasionally pretty edgy things. I started worrying about that, you know, that maybe I’d be eaten alive by people because, you know, my book says some rather politically incorrect things. And then I would be forced to become one of these canceled comedian people, where I’d be like, “Have I triggered you much?” [Tuck laughs] You know, kind of like become Ricky Gervais or something. It’s the most boring thing. Everybody goes through the same narrative.

**Tuck:** Yeah, well I did want to ask you about that, because you could have just avoided weighing in on gender entirely, but Darryl does talk about transness in the book. He thinks about transitioning himself, but he also says things that made me laugh a lot like, “If I was trans, I probably wouldn’t be able to shut up about it either.” Or, “The long and short of it is that bodies don’t matter, but also she has to change hers to be a woman.” Those were very funny to me; I definitely don’t begrudge you for it. But I’m curious why you chose to talk about transness when you did have these concerns that anything you said would either be misread or be tokenized in some way.

**Jackie:** Well, I mean, I think at some level, I did have a little bit of confidence that this wouldn’t happen. I mean, for one thing, I wasn’t always sure that I was gonna publish it at all. Or I thought that maybe it would only be read by people who know me, or something like that. And so I did have some kind of confidence that was underwritten by obscurity. But I also think that as I shared the manuscript with more people over the years, like I shared it with a few people who I sort of wondered, like, you know, “Are you going to start hating me after you read this or something?” And I had the conversations and they were like, “No, this is actually—” you know, they were with it. Including people who might, from my perspective, be people who I consider to be a little bit more strident, and people who I’m a little bit afraid of being wrong around. And I love people like that, for what it’s worth. I mean, sometimes I’ve definitely been burned by people like that, but I think it’s worth it. You know, like, I like knowing people who are trying, and sometimes that’s what trying looks like.

But I think that you know, to me, it actually felt kind of important to represent those things also, because I think that we do have the situation, right, where there is such a thing as kind of harsh opposition or something like that. But there are also, you know, forms of misunderstanding that maybe people who don’t get it yet but they kind of want to; maybe people who have some kind of intense emotional block that they’re going to come around on. Maybe people who have some adjacent super weirdness? I don’t think that trans people are the only people who have an interesting relationship to gender. So I felt like maybe it was possible to kind of open some lines of communication through something like this. And in a way, I think it kind of freed me to voice things that had been, you know, doubts that I had gone through, like, because that’s another category of people who might be just off to the side of it. You know, I’m a person who, from when I first said that I wanted to transition to when I did was over a decade, and I spent much of the time in between basically believing that it was impossible, and I knew trans people during that time. And some of them even kind of grilled me. They were like, “So like, are you going to do this, or what’s your deal?” Right? So I feel like I’ve seen it from the inside and the outside and I wanted to write from the outside. And I think that it freed me up to do art in a less confessional mode, right? But which basically, you know, is highly confessional. But it’s confessional for somebody else.

But anyway, I think that at some point, the decision to publish it involved a lot of trust. And I think I had to figure out for a long time: did I trust my community? Also, you know, another big concern for me was, did I trust a different kind of misreading? Because like, I don’t want to act like you know, the big hazard to me is that I would go get cancelled by the social justice warriors on Twitter or something—that’s actually not really the problem. The bigger concern would be what if I was misread by people that were actually kind of horrible about it? And they were like, “Ah, finally, one of them is willing to be honest about how this really is!” Right? That would be, I think, a considerably greater concern. And I think that somehow Darryl’s sort of extreme non-normativity and his extreme error make it a little bit safer that way, right? Like because I could imagine a person recognizing Darryl’s prejudices as their own, or recognizing Darryl’s ignorance as their own. But it would be hard to say that that person would feel validated if they’d read the book, you know. I do actually think that there’s something that’s wise about Darryl and Darryl has some little part of the truth, but it’s not actually a part of the truth that you can live in. That’s part of, I think, what is difficult and kind of persistent for me about the character is that, I say to Darryl, “We can’t live like you.” And Darryl says, “Yes, but what about this? Aren’t you actually closing the door on some part of, I don’t know, the emotional world?” I don’t know how to describe that part of the emotional world, you know, like part of what goes into the book is actually some amount of clinical language.

**Tuck:** Yeah, I’m thinking about the parts in the book where Darryl uses the language that some people use to describe being trans to talk about him being a cuck. Like he’ll say something like, “I’m okay with anyone as long as you understand that my identity isn’t up for debate.” And when I read things like that, I couldn’t tell if I was feeling like I related to him in those statements, or if I was feeling offended that he was taking those statements and applying them to that. Is that something that you were thinking about when you were writing that language into the book?

**Jackie:** Oh, yeah, totally. I see those as kind of Darryl’s moments of unsustainable pluck. And I think that moments like that provide a lot of humor to the book. You know, where he sort of sets himself up as a cuckolds’ rights activist or swingers’ activist or something like that. Because it’s so laughably impossible, I think, in a way and I feel kind of bad because, especially, you know, people in that lifestyle have emailed me, you know, appreciating the book and, you know, and I appreciate them. I actually think that those people are kind of cool. It’s not quite my vibe, but you know, like, I’m my own kind of weirdo. So respect, you know, freak to freak.

But the thing about it is that, to me, there’s a way that those voices are so funny. You know, like there’s a certain mood if you’re on Twitter, and somebody will be like, “Buckle up fuckos, thread time,” you know, and “Friendly reminder that…” You know, like all of this stuff. I feel like somehow one of the wonderful things about writing is that you don’t have to be annoyed by people; you can portray them and kind of have fun with it. Because I don’t hate posts like that. I do mute them actually—I mute all the phrases like that, that I can think of, you know. If you start a tweet with “friendly reminder” I won’t see it, but I definitely wanted to see, you know, what can people do with these voices and with these kind of styles of identity discourse far outside of their domain of application? Because that is actually the story of much of the language that we do credit. We take a lot of language out of movements that may be, you know, very specifically, Black or Indigenous or Marxist or whatever. And the language of social justice is sort of a patois, right? There’s a kind of—and that is a language. You know, there’s some—I don’t really want to minimize it for that reason, but I think that sometimes those things can be considered in a way that is pretty funny.

For example, when people will talk about, you know, the language of reclaiming slurs, what words do I own, and I own them because of pain. And there’s this whole kind of implicit analysis there that I think does not stand up under scrutiny really, at all. My impression of it is that it basically comes from a really bad theory of AAVE and an attempt to sort of imitate that and so every group is like, “Oh, we should make our own N-word or something.” And it’s—don’t, it doesn’t help you. It’s not even really what anybody’s doing. But anyway, you know, there’s a few swing and a miss kind of moments. There’s a lot of moments where they just seem a little grandiose or something like that. And I wanted to write in those kinds of grandiose voices. And in some sense, for me, the kind of irony there is I’m like, this is the way that I think that people wanted me to write about my own identity. And I’m like, “No, no, but I’ll give you the voice.” You know? I’ll give you the voice, but it’s going to be about something else.

**Tuck:** I have noticed that more than once, in interviews, in Goodread reviews of *Darryl*, people feel compelled to disclose like, “I’m very vanilla. I’m a prude. I’m in a monogamous marriage.” Has it been common for people to want to like confess to you how they fuck or don’t fuck when they read *Darryl*?

**Jackie:** Not very. I mean, I think surely people who are in that specific lifestyle have sometimes been like, “Wow,” like they feel seen, you know, like, “I know what’s up with that. That was kind of cool to read about” or something. But I think that for the most part, you know, people keep that to themselves and I don’t know—I have a kind of icy teacherly persona in a lot of places and I don’t think that people like form crushes on me, or try to talk to me about sexual matters or something like that, because they know. They’re like, “No, I better sharpen up, bring my A-game. That’s how I talk to Jackie.” I don’t know. I mean, this is just my—maybe I’m just not cute or something. I don’t know. But that’s been my experience.

And as far as people confessing stuff to me, I don’t really create the space for that. Like I think I wouldn’t be very good at it. Like I, at one point in my life, had thought a lot about being a therapist, and I decided that I wasn’t really nice enough, you know, that I was sort of more interested in the truth about people than I was interested in people. That’s fiction, right? You know, it’s a much better idea. And I mean, I don’t want to be too—you know, I’m not Clive, but I think that I know myself in that way. And that’s something that I kind of show and that somehow, if somebody has like a lot of interesting issues with their sex life, then that’s a lot of humanity. But I’m not obviously kind of a one on one teacher or confidante or something like that.

And I think that one thing that I am glad that people kind of get is that, you know, people who write fiction are not necessarily all that interpersonally smart. You know, I don’t know if I am. I think that I do have some elements of that because of experience doing kind of community oriented things. Right? The reason that I can talk to people is because of my experiences talking to people, not because of my experiences writing novels. But yeah. Jackie Ess, Sex Therapist. You’re really lost if you’re going for that, I have to say. You’re not really lost if you found something that you vibe with in my book. No, absolutely not. But if you need some help, or if you need, you know, if you’re looking for someone to lay you down, that I recognize and, you know, I’m probably not the one to do it.

**Tuck:** Well, yeah, I think that’s for the best. I’m glad that people are actually understanding a human boundary. It’s interesting to hear you talk about sort of your persona and how you come across to people because there’s not a lot of earnest information about you available to the public. The author photo of you in *Darryl* is of trees. The main photo that’s often run of you is from far away with a mask; your writing before this book was often published under other names. You have, like you said, played bits and personas on Twitter, elsewhere. Your bio is famously “Nice, normal, loves to laugh.” I’m not saying that’s wrong, but that’s not revealing—

**Jackie:** I have my pronouns in there now too, you know, you know, so now people get it right.

**Tuck:** Oooh. Good. When I obscure facts about my personal life, sometimes it’s for safety reasons, like who I am; work I’ve done. Sometimes I just don’t like strangers knowing my business. So I’m curious where that impulse comes from for you. And I’m trying to ask this in a way that doesn’t ask you to reveal the things you’re trying to not reveal, but is there a way that you can speak to that?

**Jackie:** Yeah, no, I think I can say that in a way that won’t set off the sleuths or something. I kind of respect the sleuthing impulse. I mean, one thing that is, it’s a big problem for me, like when I get really excited about somebody, I’ll kind of like archive binge them. I’m always like, “Oh, I want to read all of your social media and like, you know, all of the articles that you’ve ever written and I’m gonna see if I can get past these paywalls, or am I really going to pay for a subscription to, you know, this British literary magazine just so that I can get down to what you said in 1994?” But, you know, I do things like that, and so I get the impulse.

I am relatively quiet about myself for, for many reasons. I mean, part of it is just a habit. You know, I think that when I transitioned, which wasn’t honestly all that long ago—you know, like, I transitioned less than 10 years ago, so I’m new. I’m a baby, I’m barely here, you know. It’s part of why I don’t write trans characters. I’m just like, “What do I know about it? You know, I’ve been barely doing this for what, seven years or something.” So, but at the beginning, it was really a concern about that.

I think probably in the long run, you know, the tendency is to get a little bit more relaxed about things like that. I would expect that I probably will. I don’t really mind—I do—I have posted selfies, you know. I have an Instagram—it has, like, three posts on it. I basically only post a selfie if I have my dog with me, because, you know, I just—there’s something about it that, I can’t do it, where it’s just like me. Camera. Cuteness. That’s it. Right? Like, that’s why I feel like, you know, when somebody sees a picture of me and the dog, you can like it as a puppy photo. You can like as a me and the puppy photo. You can like it as a me photo, you know, do whatever. But I have a kind of a tough relationship to things like that, you know, especially now. Because like I used to have style. I mean, compared to some, probably no, but I thought I had style for a minute and yeah, pandemic? No way. I’m basic now, right? [Tuck laughs] I’m finally, you know, when I got vaccinated, I was able to get a haircut, but that’s it.

But yeah, I do think that the privacy of authors is kind of important and in some ways, a little bit aspirational. I mean, I think that I’ve had the attitude that the smaller you are, the more you have to do it, right? It’s sort of notable to be an author rather than a content hustler. It’s sort of like it’s a privilege of fame. It’s something that I do kind of aspire to. I could imagine that you know, maybe a few books from now I’ll be able to delete my social media and that sounds pretty nice. Even though I do have fun on social media.

**Tuck:** It is so funny how many people are aspiring to be big enough that they can leave twitter.com. You see Elon Musk tweeting, and everyone’s like, “If I had billions of dollars, I would never come on this website.” I did want to circle back—you mentioned *Nevada* a while ago, and there’s a big gesture towards *Nevada* in the book. You grab a plot line from Dennis Cooper’s *The Sluts* halfway through; you hold on for the rest of the novel. There’s a lot of smaller allusions; I’m pretty sure at one point you just described an *Oh Joy, Sex Toy* comic. I really like that feeling that the book is like a little scavenger hunt and we’re all grabbing different things, because there’s also a lot of references that I didn’t—that I know were there, but that I didn’t catch when I was reading. I’m curious how you think about this role of reference when you’re crafting your work.

**Jackie:** Yeah, I mean, I had worried about it a little bit because I did have the thought that there are certain texts which basically announced themselves as like, “If you don’t catch my references, you’re not reading,” or that sort of insult the reader who doesn’t get the reference, and I really, really did not want to do that. Right? I wanted this thing to be studded with everything I’d ever thought about. But I also wanted to sense that it would be enjoyable if you got none of the references, and that basically two readers have a different experience because they catch things or they don’t, you know.

And of course, all the things that you mentioned are there, but actually I’m noticing that I’m doing less of it as I go on. And maybe part of it is that for me, you know, before this, I had written a lot of lyric poetry, basically. And I had been very turned on by, by kind of New York School, and I think that they, there’s an approach to reference there that I thought was kind of like very light, and it was something that I probably picked up from them. I don’t know. I mean, I hope they agree. You know, I hope I didn’t piss off Tony Towle, you know, like there’s some of these people that show up.

But I’m thinking about, you know, in the next book, because I may not just have, not have a very committed view on that at all. Yeah, because in the next book, it does come up a little bit, but it’s more anchored to characters. So you know, there is a character who has a lot of interest in the history of international law. And so of course, he reads Hugo Grotius, you know, *Mare Liberum*, The Free Seas, you know, it’s the, kind of the origin of the concept of international waters, but also kind of a manual for the Dutch East India Company to basically commit genocide. Also I don’t know why I say basically. And this stuff is very bound up in like the history of capitalism, the history of colonialism. It makes a lot of sense for characters to be thinking about that in this next book.

And by the way, I’m not saying anybody has to go and read Hugo Grotius. It’s quite dry and there’s much too much of it. If you are reading it, talk to me. I’m actually really, really interested in finding anybody who is reading this stuff. But this was something that I actually basically found out by testing on early readers, and I have a whole discipline of testing on early readers. There are some people who I read chapters to on the phone. There are some people who read entire manuscripts and comment on them. So I usually get kind of feedback on questions like that, because it’s not like I expect my friends to read the same things that I’m reading. And in fact, how boring would that be? Like, they’d better be reading their own thing and telling me about it, right? And so I certainly hope that nobody picks up *Darryl* and says, “Aha, there’s a passing joking reference to Jacques Lacan. I better go and read the *Seminars*.” I don’t want to send somebody in there. Especially not in the Lacan direction. Fuck those people. But… no offence. [Tuck laughs] This is not the radio, so we can just talk, right?

**Tuck:** Yeah, absolutely! Yeah. I think it’s a really obvious and not interesting and also particularly not-interesting-to-you question to say, “What’s the future of trans lit?” because what does “trans lit” even mean? But I’m thinking about more from the angle of, we just saw Torrey [Peters] have a lot of mainstream success with *Detransition, Baby*; your book is getting quite a bit of success; there are others. I’m thinking more from an industry perspective whether you think that we’ll be moving more towards an area of increased representation for experimental trans work, or if you think that somehow the success of, let’s say, Torrey’s book, which is great and well-deserved, will lead to less space to be freaky and experiment because people are trying to make the next mainstream *Detransition, Baby* or the next *Darryl* or whatever.

**Jackie:** Well, that is not a boring question at all! [Tuck laughs] I mean, I have to think about this stuff all the time, and of course I want to be the industry baby, you know. I feel like if, anything that kind of gets me a chance to meet Jack Harlow, right, ’cause I’ve been stanning.

**Tuck:** I was listening to that album right before we recorded; I love this. Go ahead.

**Jackie:** I guess what I would say about the industry is that we are in an interesting moment of openness, because—so I’ve said this before, but I think there’s kind of a staged model, where at some point they may say, “Oh, yes, we’re interested in these kinds of minority voices and perspectives, et cetera, but basically, they’d better do it our way. We’re going to try to teach them to write, or we’re going to sort of expect a certain kind of cookie-cutter narrative.” And with few exceptions, it’s very, very hard to get anything through that doesn’t fit certain publishing industry norms, and those norms may not fit your life, and that can be a big problem. You know, what if you have a life that is considered to be—people say, “Oh, well, this is just trauma porn” or something like that, and you’re just like, “No, no, no, it happened.”

But I will say that, thinking about the stages, right, that there’s a stage where it’s like, they recruit a small number of minority voices, and they say, “Yeah, but we know better, and you better do it this way” and I think right now we’re in a kind of open period where people don’t really know what a trans book can do. And a lot of the concerns as we move into the third phase—which I don’t think will be too soon—but I think that there are questions that are open now that are going to close soon. And so one question might be, if you write a trans book that includes some kind of sketchy or divergent kind of perspectives on transness, are you going to be eaten alive by other trans people? Are you going to be picked up by anti-trans people? If your book has sex in it, will you lose the YA audience, or do trans readers kind of largely move as a kind of mixed-age bloc? It feels like in some ways we do; it feels like sometimes actually it’s a little frustrating that we do, because I don’t know necessarily what a lot of my work has to say to a much younger person.

But I mean, I read books for much older people when I was young, so whatever. People will follow their own paths. But these kinds of questions—kind of like the question of, let’s say that you wanted to write the book of American suburbia and be the next Jonathan Franzen. And by the way, I *love* Jonathan Franzen. I’m reading *Crossroads* right now, the new one, and it’s just kicking my ass. It’s so, so good. And I really—I don’t understand, ’cause I—this is my first thing that I’ve read by him, and there are so many haters and they are so, so wrong.

**Tuck:** I don’t know how much of the hate is for his work and how much of the hate is for saying things like, “I was going to adopt a Syrian war orphan in order to learn more about what teens are talking about these days.” I think it’s more coming from that, maybe.

**Jackie:** Oh, that’s actually—yeah, that’s a pretty awkward thing to say. Although in that vein, I have to shout out one of the better trans books of 2021; a definite contender is *The Wrong End of the Telescope* by Rabih Alameddine, and that follows a trans lesbian Lebanese doctor who goes to work in a refugee camp on the island of Lesbos, and it’s amazing. And I’m like, “Dude, how did you do this? Because you’re doing the stuff that I said that—‘This is why trans women have to write trans women,’ and....” And anyway, that guy...you know, cookout invitation extended—it’s so fucking cool.

But I guess coming back to those questions of audience sizing; and do people move as blocs; and if you write in a certain way, do you lose your Christian audience? Do you stop getting picked up by schools? Do people argue with you on the internet; is that a negative for your sales; is that a *positive* for your sales? There’s a lot of thinking in those kinds of crass terms, and there are a lot of people in the industry that are kind of invisible that are between you, the writer, and getting a book actually printed. And so I think that basically right now, there is a feeling that from this kind of bean-counting perspective, trans literature can surprise. I think it will always be able to surprise from the perspective of literature just because, you know, somehow writers just manage to keep making content. It’s amazing that the novel has continued to be a productive form, that the lyric poem has continued to be a productive form, that the memoir has continued to be a productive form. This is all wonderful. But from the industry perspective, I think that we are seeing some openness that will probably close after we see a few successes, a few flops.

And so, you know, I think that we’re going to end up in a position that’s similar to a lot of other minority literatures, and I don’t think that those other minority literatures are particularly impeded. Right? I think that, like, okay, maybe I think trans women are sort of new to a certain sphere of the publishing industry. Are Black women new to the publishing industry? No! But is there amazing literature that comes out, you know, every day? Of course! And I don’t really think that there’s really been a restriction of innovation, or an extraordinary difficulty breaking in. I mean of course, I kind of want to temper what I say here, because I’m just trying to imply that things are level, not that they’re fair. But I guess somehow, occupying several minority groups, it doesn’t strike me as a big crisis, actually. It strikes me as mostly a good thing. You know? A lot more people are reading trans books, and maybe there are certain kinds of perspectives that are obviously going to have wider circulation, and that could be a problem with the industry; it could be a problem with the audience. And it could be a problem with the ideas! You know, sometimes you could say to the writer, “You know, a million people don’t want to read your stuff, but maybe it’s because you’re telling a story that really has no place for them; they can’t put themselves in it.” How much do people want to read books where they’re essentially the villain? I don’t think that people can really cope with that. You know? I think that we don’t manage that very well, necessarily; we tell the story about the person who we want to talk about.

And so you could say, to me, part of the reason why Torrey’s book is so successful is that Torrey’s book is a book that says cis and trans people have something in common, and each is chasing what the other has, and until we can see each other that way, that we’ll be chasing our own tails. And so of course it’s successful; it should be. And that’s like—you know, I told my family to read Torrey’s book; I didn’t tell them to read my book. They read it anyway. For a little while I didn’t let them, but I’m now—now they’ve read it. Mostly, they’ve read it.

**Tuck:** That’s so interesting. Well, the way we always end the show is by asking, in your ideal world, what would the future of gender look like?

**Jackie:** Huh. Okay, let me actually try, because there are certainly ways that I’m a little frustrated with the present of gender. I think that probably it would be a little bit easier to negotiate a lot of the middle spaces without the fear that you were giving something up. I think that quite a lot of people right now are having a not very free conversation. When I talk about gender, I have to consider that perhaps I have to go and have a medical exam that will be approved by the immigration authorities or something like that, you know? I have to negotiate with an insurance company, with a family member who doesn’t understand, with a doctor, whatever, you know, at work—there’s a million places where you have to do it.

And so when you have an identity that’s sort of under scrutiny, the narratives around it become very hard. And, you know, we become very protective of the type of urgency that we have, you know, because we sort of have to simultaneously defend some very difficult-to-bring-together propositions, right? Because I have to say both that this is the most urgent, soul-destroying thing, that I absolutely have to do it, that it’s driving me off the edge; oh and by the way, I’m completely competent and wise. Right? And that’s actually a very difficult thing to manage, right, is to say that I have a serious condition for which I must be my own doctor. And I think that the need to say that is genuine, and I don’t really want to be like, “Oh, let’s just fuck up the narratives just to kind of clear it up” or something like that. But I wish for a world where those narratives will be a little freer, because we’re *actually* a little freer, because there’s less riding on it. You know? There’s less scrutiny; there’s less negotiation with a transphobic society by default. And I think that in that world, you would find a lot of people who currently say very boring things about gender—such as I say very boring things about gender if you meet me in real life; I say interesting things about gender in my books because I can safely assume that no one reads. But I would love to see that pressure removed, and I think that part of what I would see there is that a lot of people with probably, apparently somewhat conservative opinions about gender would actually kind of come out of the woodwork, and, you know, we or they, however you want to say it, might have a lot to say.

[Gender Reveal theme music starts]

**Tuck:** That’s gonna do it for this week’s show. If you had a good time or learned something, please share this episode with your community and please consider supporting what we do here at patreon.com/gender. You can find Jackie on Twitter @jackie\_ess, that’s E-S-S; find *Darryl* on Bookshop or wherever books are sold. We are on Twitter and Instagram @gendereveal and at genderpodcast.com, where you can find our FAQ page, past grant winners, and transcripts of every episode. Our limited-time-only merch shop is at bit.ly/gendermerch, and our Slack community lives at bit.ly/genderslack2.

This episode was produced and edited by Julia Llinas Goodman and by me, Tuck Woodstock, with additional research help by Cass Adair. 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.

[Gender Reveal theme music ends]

**Tuck:** It’s like why I watch reality TV sometimes; I’m like, “What are they up to? What’s that life like?”

**Jackie:** That is a fun world. It always cracked me up that there was a guy called The Situation. [Tuck laughs] But that’s—that’s cool to me. I don’t know. I don’t really know about the rest of it, but I would hang out with The Sitch, probably.