[*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, Molly Woodstock.

[*Gender Reveal* theme song ends]

Welcome back! Great to see you. Love that you’re here! Thank you so much to everyone who waited it out through the longest season break we have ever taken. Thank you to everyone who has joined us since our last season ended. I am so excited that you are all here, I am excited to be here with you.

This week on the show, we spoke with Cyrus Dunham, the author of the book [*A Year Without A Name*](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/41716923-a-year-without-a-name), which came out last October. I had an *extremely* delightful time talking with Cyrus about whether top surgery contributes to colonialism, how changing our name can feel a lot like falling in love, how proximity to fame can affect your transition or not, and whether being cis is, like, even a thing.

**Cyrus:** I don’t know how much I even believe in cisness. I’m kind of like, cisness is a delusion, and I wanted to write something that hopefully, some people would be able to read and be like, “Wait, actually it *does* suck being a cis man.” [laughs] “Actually, being a cis woman has been so, so painful for me.”

[quiet electronic background music starts]

**Tuck:** But first, I want to address the reason it took extra long to get this season together, and it was because, during the season break, I quit my day job. I had been working as a full-time journalist for close to seven years. I edited the entire Portland visitors’ guide this year, which you can get for free online if you want to see the other part of my life. But the point is that I quit that job, I gave up my health insurance – which I still am not 100% sure was the best move. But here I am, a full-time professional trans person, who is now supporting themselves through two avenues, both incredibly homosexual.

One is I am working at [Sylveon Consulting](https://www.sylveonconsulting.com/), an equity consulting business that I started with my friend Cass Adair. We work with businesses, schools, organizations, individuals with all manners of particularly trans equity topics, but I do general equity as well. That can be sensitivity reading a book that mentions trans topics or that doesn’t mention trans topics – but sometimes even when you’re not talking about trans people, you’re still being transphobic. That can look like working with organizations to implement policies that lead to trans employees and customers being treated better. It can look like a lot of different things, so if you are interested in that or you think that someone in your life could be interested in that, please check out <sylveon.co> to learn more about the work that we are doing.

But also, I make a podcast about gender. And you can help support the show, you can help support trans media at [patreon.com/gender](http://patreon.com/gender). Did you know that Patreon is now my *primary* source of income? Again, was that a good decision? Patreon could collapse at any second! But so could society. So! [Patreon.com/gender](http://patreon.com/gender). If you join us at $1/month, you get my unending gratitude and also access to our exclusive newsletter, where we give out all sorts of behind-the-scenes information, such as who the guest was going to be this week, the fact that I quit my job, merch discounts, all sorts of stuff. That’s one dollar or more at [patreon.com/gender](http://patreon.com/gender). If you donate five dollars or more, you will receive Gender Reveal stickers in the mail. If you donate ten dollars or more, I will send you Gender Reveal pins and also a hand-written letter saying how much I appreciate you. Again, thank you so so so much to all, excuse me, *four hundred* of you who are currently supporting us on Patreon. That is an absolutely, incredibly high percentage of listeners when you look at the engagement in the average podcast, and it’s because y’all are the best and you care about trans media a lot and it really means the world to me. As you know, we don’t just use that money to pay me and to feed my cat, we also use that money for our grant program, which gave, I think, $2500 last Fall to trans folks of color.

[music ends]

It goes to printing stickers and making pins, and paying hosting fees, and hiring tape-syncs like the one that we used this week with Isaura Aceves, and I just appreciate your support so much and need to stop talking about it and move on to… This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender intro plays]

So. You may have heard that Merriam-Webster, the dictionary, made ‘they’ their 2019 Word of the Year. And when that happened, there were all the usual discussions about whether it is okay and normal and valid to use they/them pronouns, and whether it should have been made Word of the Year. And I ended up getting into a number of conversations about this, including on National Public Radio’s Morning Edition and also my parent. And so between those two things, I really honed some talking points, and I wanted to share them with you, in case you find yourself in a situation where you’re arguing with someone about whether they/them pronouns should exist. Of course, feel free to not argue with them and just walk away.

[bell dings]

The first argument you might hear is, “Well, the grammar is wrong.” And as I’m sure you know, because you listen to this podcast, the Oxford English Dictionary has tracked the use of singular ‘they’ back to 1375. In addition, as you know, we all use they/them pronouns for a singular person, naturally, all the time. If you find a wallet on the ground, you might say, “Oh, someone left their wallet. I hope they come back for it.” Very, very few English speakers on earth would say, “Oh, someone left his or her wallet. I hope he or she comes back for it.” So we all know how to use singular ‘they,’ the thing that some people are bad at is using singular ‘they’ when they are asked to do it. They actually only want to do it when they are not being told, and as soon as you ask them to do it, they’re like, “Well, no, I actually hate that.”

My third argument is that in ye olden days, ‘thou’ was singular ‘you.’ ‘You’ meant plural, ‘thou’ meant singular. And when people started using ‘you’ as a singular, everyone lost their minds and said it was too confusing and society was going to collapse… and we did not have a collapse of society with the singular ‘you’ and we are not going to have a collapse of society with the singular ‘they.’ It is all going to be okay.

[bell dings]

I’ve also had way too many people ask me, “But is it ‘they is’ or ‘they are’?” Obviously it’s ‘they are,’ we all know how to conjugate ‘they.’ Again, people do this all the time naturally, they are being willfully difficult. The only thing that is tricky is “Is it themselves or themself?” and the answer is it doesn’t matter, use whatever you want. Language is fake.

[bell dings]

Another favorite argument is, “Well, why can’t y’all weirdos just make up a *new* singular pronoun?” And my argument to this is people have been trying for decades and decades and decades. People tried with ze/hir. People tried with ee/em and e/em. People tried with ze/zem. People tried with pronouns that I’ve never even heard of, and the reason I haven’t heard of them is because they didn’t work out. We have been trying this for decades, and cis people refused to use them. Often other trans people refused to use them. And they just couldn’t catch on. And you know what did catch on is they/them pronouns. That works really well, because even if people insist they don’t, they actually do already know how to use them, and they can remember them. And I had someone say recently, “Well, yeah, it didn’t work before, but it’ll work now to invent a new word,” and my argument is no it *doesn’t*. And the reason I know that is because multiple people on this show have used neopronouns and it is very difficult to get people to use them. If people *insist* that inventing a new pronoun would be easier, ask them to use neopronounsfor everyone for a week and see how much success they have with that.

[bell dings]

Okay. Another argument you’ll hear all the time is, “They/them pronouns are so confusing.” And yes, if I was talking about two different people who use they/them pronouns and I said something like, “They talked to them,” it might be confusing, but if I was talking about two people who use she/her pronouns and I said, “She was talking to her,” that would also be confusing. The entire premise of pronouns is we use them when we can get away with it without the sentence being unclear. And yes, it may throw you off a little bit at first, but just because you don’t immediately understand something doesn’t mean it’s wrong. People speak in languages you don’t understand and just because you don’t understand them doesn’t mean they’re speaking incorrectly. What you need to do is learn the language. What you need to do is practice listening to people use they/them pronouns.

If you really don’t understand what they’re saying, you can ask for clarification! Which we also do all the time. If someone was saying, “I was talking to her,” and I didn’t know what ‘her’ they were talking about, I would say, “Who?” And you can do that when someone’s talking about they/them pronouns! I wouldn’t do it all the time, because then you’re an asshole, but if you’re really confused, you can ask.

[bell dings]

A well-intentioned but frustrating thing that I’ll hear from cis people is “Why does this even matter? Why does it *matter* what language I use for you?” So remember when we just talked about things being confusing? What’s confusing is when you use the wrong pronouns for someone. If someone refers to me with she/her pronouns, I don’t realize they’re talking about me for a while because I am not used to hearing that in association with me. Also, you know, basic human respect.

The thing about pronouns is that they are all equally fake, and so, by extension, they are all equally real. My pronouns are just as much a fact as anyone else’s pronouns. They are not up for debate any more than any cis person’s pronouns are up for debate. And I know *you* know this because you’re listening to the show, but tell it to *everyone* around you.

If you have heard additional arguments about why we shouldn’t use they/them pronouns, please send them in and I will fight them on this podcast for you. In addition, as I said, I am part of a company called Sylveon Consulting. Something that I do is offer Trans 101 workshops and lectures, so if you’re somewhere that could benefit from that, hire me to give this whole spiel in front of, like, a whole *group* of people!

Also, if you’re out there using they/them pronouns, getting misgendered, I just want to say that that happens to me all the time too. I’m sorry it’s happening to you, it’s not your fault. You are trans enough and I love you. This has been This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender outro plays]

We have a piece of Theymail this week! Theymail is a system where you send us a little bit of money, whatever you can afford, and we read your message on the show. So this is from the WTQ Trades Community.It says, “I am not sure how many listeners you have near Vancouver, Canada, but I have started an LGBTQ+ community for people in the trades, such as plumbers, carpenters, electricians. The idea is to network online, as well as have monthly meet-ups to connect and share experiences and hopefully make the trades a better place for queer folks. The community can be found at wtqtradescommunity@gmail.com or on Facebook at WTQ Trades Community.”

[upbeat electronic music plays]

Cyrus Dunham is a writer and organizer living in Los Angeles. His first book, *A Year Without A Name*, is available from Little, Brown.Editor’s note from me: We start the interview talking about how Cyrus feels like he/him pronouns are too intimate to use publicly, but that was in October, and this is January, and now he uses he/him pronouns pretty much exclusively. I am so happy for him. Also, gender! What are you going to do?

[upbeat electronic music ends, interview begins]

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

**Cyrus:** It’s such a simple question, yet such a complicated one. On a deep, internal, soul level, I’ll probably always identify as non-binary. But I also identify as transmasculine or a trans man and, increasingly, I pass as a man in the world more and more, and people increasingly use he pronouns for me. This is not a simple answer – I probably should figure out how to give a shorter answer, but I think I feel best – if I have to be read as one gender, I feel best being read as a man, but in my heart of hearts, I’m non-binary.

**Tuck:** I mean, I don’t know that I trust anyone that has a simple answer, honestly. [Cyrus laughs] But, um, yeah! Do you have pronouns that you prefer?

**Cyrus:** I use he/him pronouns with my close friends and, yeah, pretty much. I mean, I’m totally cool with they, and in kind of public-facing stuff, I’ve tended towards they, but all my loved ones use he/him for me.

**Tuck:** I’m really interested in that, because I think that for many people, the dynamic is the opposite. We’ll use they/them with folks who are close to us, but then when we’re out in the world, we’ll choose either he or she because it’s easier for the public. So can you talk about why you’re using they publicly but not as much privately with your loved ones?

**Cyrus:** Yeah, that’s such a good question. I mean, I think that he is really loaded for me. It’s erotic and exhilarating and, in a way, a guilty pleasure and something that I’m ashamed to like as much as I do. So there’s a lot of trust in letting other people use it. It feels really intimate to me, whenever people use he/him pronouns for me, it feels like they’re speaking to or about a really deep down, sacred part of me that I’ve had to work so hard to let surface. And that’s not something I would easily let become part of a public persona, [dog barks] which is – sorry, that’s the dog barking in the back. [chuckles]

**Tuck:** No worries.

**Cyrus:** She knows what we’re talking about. [Tuck and Cyrus laugh] I don’t take lightly what it means to let things enter into the public screen that is external self-presentation. There’s a lack of control in being more public, and I don’t think I feel necessarily totally ready or safe having people that I don’t know and don’t have intimacy with use he pronouns for me because it’s so… such a deep, private thing that I’m still working through. Does that make sense?

**Tuck:** Yeah! I think so. I’m also interested because I read your book, of course, and I feel like your book is really focused on masculinity and men and how often you think about men or being a man or not being a man or other men or other masculinities, and you don’t really talk nearly as much about being non-binary or thinking about being non-binary at all. So I’m curious how you came to the label of identifying as non-binary when, judging solely from your book, you seem to think a lot more about masculinity and manhood.

**Cyrus:** Yeah that’s such an interesting – I appreciate that question, I don’t think I’ve gotten that feedback before. I mean, I think for a long time – and maybe I still feel that, in certain ways, my non-binariness and my desire and lust to be masculine are at odds with one another. And I think it was – I came to an intellectual understanding and position of being kind of against or disloyal to binary gender before I was able to totally let myself feel the ways I wanted to be more masculine. Because I think through encountering non-binary people, through reading, through thinking about histories of colonization and histories of the relationship between heterosexuality and binary gender and capitalism, I was able to kind of intellectually get to this place where I was like, it’s very clear if we understand material, economic, racial history why binary gender is so dominant in our culture. And it’s very clear that biological manhood and biological womanhood are fictions, and I want to think about how to reject and undermine those ideologies.

But then at the same time, knowing all that didn’t suddenly make my deep desire to be more masculine go away, and that was really painful for me, and I think I really hoped or wished that I could intellectualize my way out of the desire to be masculine. And I still feel a lot of shame about how thrilling it feels to pass a mirror and look over and see someone that resembles a man. It’s not what my wish would have been, but it’s not something that I can intellectualize my way out of.

**Tuck:** Totally. I’m curious about unpacking a little bit more about where that shame comes from, not to like be your therapist or anything, but like—

**Cyrus:** No, I don’t – [Tuck laughs] why not? I mean, we’re here, we’re alone in my bedroom… [Cyrus and Tuck laugh] What’s the point of having this conversation if you don’t just go right to the jugular of all my deepest, most unresolved problems? [both laugh]

**Tuck:** The tagline for this show used to be “a podcast where we ask intrusive personal questions” and so we’re just being on brand! [Tuck laughs]

**Cyrus:** I love your brand.

**Tuck:** Thank you!

**Cyrus:** Your brand is really similar to my brand. [Tuck laughs] My best friend has this story that she always tells about me, which is that when we were like seven years old, we’d just gotten close, I was at a diner with her and her dad, and I looked up at him and I was like, “So Charlie, um, when you were a kid, did you ever think that someday you’d be a tax lawyer who hated his job and only got pleasure from golfing?” [Tuck and Cyrus laugh] And he was like, “No. I didn’t think… that. Thank you.” [both continue to laugh] It was not – it was such a closed question, I didn’t even leave him room to, like, self-define. I was just like, this is my story of your life. How do you feel about it? [both laugh]

**Tuck:** Totally. Yeah, I relate to that. But anyway, I’d love to hear more about the shame that comes up in you when you think about feeling thrilled by masculinity.

**Cyrus:** I think there’s a lot of levels to the answers to that question. I think some of them are deeply personal and familial and about the ways that I was raised and the world that I was raised in, and a particular type of feminism that I was exposed to as a young person, and a particular narrative of the ways in which women were somehow inherently superior to men, and that being taught to me as a kind of counter-narrative to histories of sexism. And I don’t mean to totally undermine the value of that, but I also think I probably would’ve had a different understanding of gender if the gender analysis that I’d been exposed to as a young person was about the violence of binary gender, not the violence of men inherently.

And then I think, in the same vein, people have experienced and continue to experience so much harm at the hands of people who identify as men, particularly people who identify as white men. And it’s a really intense space to choose to step into, and it’s very symbolically loading and it’s very triggering. And I really feel the massiveness of kind of having that shape, even if it’s not exactly my story. I think I’ve just had to do a lot of work, and I’m still doing a lot of work, to convince myself and remind myself that it isn’t inherently bad or evil or harmful to be a masculine person. That’s something that I haven’t figured out how to totally convince myself of yet, but I believe that that work is really important, not just because of a story like mine, of someone who chooses to move towards masculinity, but also because of the ways in which that storyline contributes to cultures of transmisogyny, right?

That if there’s a belief that men are inherently more harmful, that also underlies a culture of extreme violence against people who don’t identify as men, but were forcibly assigned male at birth. So I think part of accepting myself is also trying to undermine that binary culture in which we see masculine people as perpetrators and feminine people as victims, and that being connected to biology. Yeah, it’s just a fucking long process. [chuckles]

**Tuck:** You were talking earlier about trying to sort of intellectually talk yourself out of this desire, and I was thinking about this passage in your book where you list all of your conflicting feelings about top surgery.

**Cyrus:** Mhmm.

**Tuck:** Part of the thing that really stuck out to me from that long list of conflicting feelings was your discussion about how the surgery itself is from this legacy of, as you said, mainlining gender-deviant people into having bodies that conform to white colonial myths of manhood and womanhood, and that the surgery was developed from medical experimentation on intersex and gender non-conforming children. That’s something that I think about a lot, and I was just curious… your thoughts on how we, as a society of trans and non-binary people, should be approaching surgeries that, like, make people’s lives easier both in terms of safety and in terms of dysphoria, but also are clearly, like, perpetuating this white colonial idea of what our bodies should look like.

**Cyrus:** I’m so glad you asked that question, and obviously I think about this constantly, and it’s something that I’m pretty, like, tortured by, as I think many of us are. And I so didn’t want to need to get top surgery. Like, I so wanted to be able to believe that I could be whatever gender I wanted to be without removing my breasts. But at a certain point, I was like, I just can’t do the things I want to do in the world if I don’t do this, because the amount of emotional energy that’s going toward managing my hatred of my breasts is not really leaving me much time or emotional space left over to do the exact kind of work that you’re talking about, you know? Which is really thinking about, undermining, and pushing against these systems of violence.

I think what’s helpful for me – and I don’t have an answer to that question, and I know so many people who have taken different approaches to it. I will say that in my experience of being close to people with many different experiences of and manifestations of dysphoria, it’s really really hard to intellectualize your way out of debilitating dysphoria. [chuckles] But that’s obviously a separate question from the ways in which these surgeries then become barriers of access to cisness dependent on people’s economic security and access to, you know, trans medical treatments.

I don’t have an answer, but I think something that I always try to hold is, like, the contradiction but also the simultaneity of how systems and individuals are entangled with one another. And just trying to remind myself that just because I have a systems analysis doesn’t mean that my individual choice about what I do with my body can transform or undermine a system in its entirety. And that maybe the most important thing is the conversations that we have and the ways that we contextualize things, and that we can’t direct so much of the anger that we have against these systems that have made us feel this way against ourselves and our own bodies for the things that we want and the things that we long for. Does that resonate for you?

**Tuck:** Yeah, of course. And I also think that it applies to what you were talking about with masculinity, right, is that your presentation or your gender identity is not going to, like, make or break the system that we have created. [laughs]

**Cyrus:** Yeah.

**Tuck:** Like, around masculinity and around binary gender.

**Cyrus:** But I think that the conversations like *this* maybe are where a lot of the work is, because we’re having a conversation right now where we’re not taking for granted that removing one’s breasts is essential for successfully performing a colonial white supremacist conception of masculinity. We’re using a historical materialist analysis to think about, like, the dialectical ways that our own desire is shaped by history. And I think that maybe it can’t totally undo our longing, but it’s definitely the beginning of what that might look like in a multi-generational way.

**Tuck:** Yeah, absolutely. And I also think that a lot of people’s longing is very specific dysphoria, like in your case it was very specific what you wanted, but I think for a lot of us it’s just the desire to be seen as the genders that we experience ourselves as, and so the more that we can create space for people to be seen as whatever gender they want with breasts, or whatever gender they want with any particular body part or presentation, the more options we give everyone. Because that’s the thing that I think about a lot, as someone who, like, doesn’t really want top surgery – I just want people to see, like, my breasts as trans, you know?

**Cyrus:** Yeah. Totally. Totally.

**Tuck:** And if I could achieve that, then there wouldn’t be any need for me to have surgery.

**Cyrus:** Totally.

**Tuck:** Anyway, that’s not a question, that’s just a thought! [laughs]

**Cyrus:** But it’s an important thought. [laughs] And I want to – I think something that was – I just want to say something that’s so important to me when having conversations like this, and that I really wanted to communicate in the book, and hopefully I succeeded, but I’m not sure… is just to always be very clear about the fact that even though I really wanted and felt that I needed top surgery and to start hormone-replacement therapy in order to kind of move forward with my life, I *deeply* reject that there is a hierarchy of legitimacy, of validity around what transness looks like. And I *deeply* reject the idea that going through a medical intervention makes someone trans. And I just think it’s important to say that.

**Tuck:** So, speaking of being on T and having top surgery, your book ends like five months out from those two things. And something I think about with the podcast is how it’s creating this static public record of really transitional moments in a lot of people’s lives, and the book is even more so, because people can keep this book forever and revisit this very specific moment from your life, and so I’m curious… I don’t know when you wrote the last chapters, but I’m curious how much your life has changed even since then in terms of gender, or what it feels like to have this permanent record of this transitory moment in your life.

**Cyrus:** These are such… honestly helpful questions [Tuck laughs], so if you want to be my therapist…

**Tuck:** Great! [laughs]

**Cyrus:** You totally can be. [laughs] I mean, it’s eerie reading the book, you know. I haven’t re-read it since I really finished final edits. I did the audiobook, but I think I just kind of dissociated the entire time and was literally thinking about, like, what different birds I’d seen that morning… [laughs]

**Tuck:** Oh yeah, I cannot even imagine reading this book as an audiobook. Congratulations. [Tuck and Cyrus laugh]

**Cyrus:** Things just change *so* quickly, and maybe for everyone and also *definitely*, in my experience, for people who are going through rapid gender transformations. It’s been about a year since I finished the book. I wrote the last chapter in, yeah, September, October of 2018 and that’s when it is, and it’s 2019! So it’s been about a year, and what has been really strange in that period of time is that there was such a rapid clip, during the time I wrote the book, of these changes. Changing one’s name is such a psychedelic experience. Starting hormones is *so* intense. Getting top surgery was so intense, like I felt like I was rolling for literally months afterwards. And I think that there’s been a sense of loss in things kind of slowing down and normalizing… in the same way that, like, if you’re in a relationship with someone, and you still really love them and you still really love being with them, there’s kind of sometimes just this pain in being like, we’ll never have the month that we fell in love again – that kind of, like, longing for the way in which it makes everything in your life feel so heightened and intense and extreme. And I think that those first six months of these really intense changes and finally choosing to do them after years of wanting to just really felt like falling in love. It made everything feel so vivid.

And so just kind of settling in to, like, being a person named Cyrus, having a flat chest, passing as a man, that’s been in some ways harder than the changes, because the changes were so thrilling. And I just try to remind myself that this is – I’m going to be doing the work of gender, or whatever you want to call it, until I die, and this is such a short period of time. And I’m sure in five years I’ll look back on who I am now and be like, wow, you had no idea what was coming, you were such a baby. But I already find myself being like, maybe I’ll change my name again, just because it offers this portal for a form of… not just reinvention, but also seeing the world in a new way. So yeah, I would say that the hardest thing has been things almost settling. But I think that’s a really important lesson for me, because I’m definitely an experience-seeker and I really like intensity, and I really like when things feel heightened, so in some ways I feel like the work for me is letting things be a little slower and quieter.

**Tuck:** Yeah! So as you have moved towards passing as a man or being read as a man by other people, you mentioned in the book that you’ve experienced this pushback, and even violence, where people are angry with you not because they clock that you’re trans, but because they’re reading you as a man who’s failing to be a man. I was wondering if you could talk about that.

**Cyrus:** Well, I’m definitely getting less of it now, as my voice has lowered. I think as I feel more comfortable or confident that I do look like a man, I probably move with more certainty. So that’s interesting and complicated too. But yeah, I really wanted to talk about that in the book because I wanted to be really clear about the fact that, you know… I think that as a white woman, as someone who was raised as a white girl, I was taught to feel a really specific type of danger or vulnerability – like, I was always on the brink of a type of victimhood. And I don’t say that to undermine the ways in which that’s a really legitimate experience for a lot of people, but just to say that it’s a lot more complicated than that, and that the ways people experience violence, as we know, are obviously deeply classed and racialized.

And white women are not the epicenter of super physical, material violence. And I think that I always thought that if I was afraid of being harmed or that people wanted to harm me, it would be because they could see my womanhood. And it was really interesting for me to start to realize that… it was often much more about, like, a supposed biological manhood. And that, I think, really helped connect to and think differently about the experiences of non-binary and femme people in my life who were assigned male at birth, but who didn’t pass as cis women, and the ways in which they experience violence.

The first time this really clicked in for me is – I was already identifying as non-binary, but I guess I still… I don’t really know what I looked like, but I went into the women’s room. I was still using the women’s restroom at that time. And I was on the toilet going to the bathroom and this security guard threw the door open, came in [Tuck gasps], grabbed me by the collar and pushed me against the wall, and was like, “Dude, this is a fucking woman’s restroom,” you know. I was so rattled, obviously, and I kind of pulled my pants up and stumbled out, but in that moment, I was like, that… person thought I was a man going into the woman’s restroom, which probably means he thought I was a man pretending to be a woman, which probably means that the violence I just experienced is actually rooted in transmisogyny. Do you know what I’m saying? That was a really important catalyst for me, where I sort of started to *feel* the truth of that, rather than just understand it intellectually.

**Tuck:** Yeah! Absolutely. Also I’m really sorry that happened to you.

**Cyrus:** Oh!

**Tuck:** It fucking sucks.

**Cyrus:** Thank you! Yeah, I’m – I’m not so – it was definitely odd. [laughs] But I’m not so good at letting myself narrate my own experiences of harm, so if I sound a little bit, like, disconnected or like an alien… I didn’t really tell anyone about that and then a few months later I mentioned it to a few friends and they were like, “Hey, that really sucks,” and I was like, “Yeah, I guess it does.” [laughs]

**Tuck:** I think that’s so common though, like I was talking the other day about how I feel like being trans and having trans community is just taking turns getting really angry at the harm that other people in your community have suffered…

**Cyrus:** Yeah.

**Tuck:** My partner’s non-binary, and they’ll tell me a story about their life in this really nonchalant way and I’ll get really infuriated on their behalf, and then I’ll tell them something that happened to me in a really nonchalant way and they’ll get infuriated on *my* behalf, but we’re not getting mad about the things that happen to ourselves, we’re getting mad on behalf of other people, because that’s so much easier.

**Cyrus:** Totally.

**Tuck:** I can listen to your story and be like, “That fucking sucks and I’m really really upset about it,” [Cyrus laughs] but if that happened to me, I’d be like, “You know, that was funny,” you know? [Tuck laughs]

**Cyrus:** Right, exactly. I’m more like, “Can you believe what happened?” [laughs] You know, that’s my…

**Tuck:** Yeah… Well, I did want to talk to you about who the book is for and what your goals were for with it, because, as someone who makes this podcast, I get sent a bunch of trans memoirs and a lot of them are really chronological and really formulaic, and I feel like are written for cis people who have never heard of trans people before. Like, there’s a glossary of terms and it’s like, “When I was four, I dressed up as a boy for Halloween.” [Cyrus laughs] And I think that your book does a really good job of sort of expressing the experience of someone who is trans, but also not doing it in this spoon-fed way. And I didn’t feel like it was necessarily written for cis people, which was really, really refreshing for me, so I’m curious what your goals were and who your ideal audience was.

**Cyrus:** Wow, I appreciate that so much. That’s the highest praise, thank you. I guess I was honestly thinking about my friends. It’s really hard to imagine people you don’t know, you know? So I was thinking about my friends and my loved ones and my past partners and my family in a way, and I was thinking, what do I want the people that I love to know that I haven’t been able to say before? What can I say in writing that I haven’t been able to say out loud? And also, what do I need to write my way through in order to get to the next phase in my life? For me, writing is such a practice of release in a way, and the book was very much structured on what do *I* need to release to move forward. And then there was some sort of mystical belief that if I really did that, if I really moved through the scariest things, then hopefully that would be an offering that other people could connect with. And I do believe that – I think that if we go into our most vulnerable, scary pockets that other people who want to connect at that level will feel it. I really do believe that.

So that was the core belief, and in imagining some audience, of course, I really hoped that people with deviant [laughs] and non-conforming genders would read it and feel a sense of resonance and a sense of connection and feel some kind of cure to the loneliness that’s so often a part of that. And I also wanted people to read it and feel like… a sense of connection around being a trans person who doesn’t have a really resolute story. Who isn’t always certain of the direction things are going or when things have come to a close. And then also I think I really wanted to write something about my gender experience that didn’t pretend that whiteness and class privilege and inherited power are invisible, and really tried to acknowledge the ways that those have inflected and impacted and shaped my experience of gender. And because of that, I don’t think everybody should or has to or will want to connect with this book, and that’s important and okay.

And then the very last thing I’ll say is that I also – it did feel important to me – I didn’t want to write a book for cis people, but I tend to be someone who, like… I don’t know how much I even believe in cisness [Tuck laughs], I’m kind of like, cisness is a delusion that some people are in closer or less close proximity to. And then some people have the luck of really identifying and enjoying the performance that they’re expected to do. But the people I know who really feel that way, but who also have a gender analysis, don’t have a strong, strong pride around being cis. They’re just like, “Yeah, I was assigned female at birth and I really like being femme.” “I was assigned male at birth and I really enjoy being masculine.”

And I wanted to write something that people who – like, I think a lot of people feel like they’re not supposed to have access to, or they’re not welcomed into trans discourse, and I really am like… feeling like you’re failing to perform the identity that you were forcibly assigned is basically relatable to everyone, whether or not they can admit it, because being the ideal man and the ideal woman are fictions that we all are forced to chase, and I wanted to write something that hopefully some people would be able to read and be like, “Wait, it actually *does* suck being a cis man.” [Cyrus and Tuck laugh] “Actually, being a cis woman *has* been so, so painful for me.” So that was important to me too, you know? [chuckles]

**Tuck:** Yeah! That actually reminds me, I do gender equity trainings, and I was at this university and I asked everyone to talk in groups about… I don’t remember the prompt! But what happened was everyone was talking about times that they hadn’t conformed to their gender, and how challenging that had been…

**Cyrus:** Mmm.

**Tuck:** And I listened to them all talk in small groups for five minutes and then I was like, “Okay, raise your hand if you talked about a time when you felt like you weren’t able to conform to your gender,” and only like four people out of like sixty raised their hand.

**Cyrus:** Wow.

**Tuck:** And it’s like, okay, except for you all did. You just did! I heard you!

**Cyrus:** That’s *so* funny. See, it’s so about the language that you use.

**Tuck:** Right.

**Cyrus:** It’s like, if you’re an AMAB person who identifies as a man and you ever hated yourself for being short, you’ve struggled with a form of dysphoria rooted in gender violence. Yeah, I couldn’t – it’s so important. What do we do? How do we make cis people understand that they’ve been hurt by gender? [laughs]

**Tuck:** Yeah! Really! I mean, I don’t know. But I think that’s something that I do appreciate about the book and it’s the same thing that I try to do with the podcast, is it’s not like cis people don’t interact, it’s just like I am not going to center the experiences of cis people who don’t have a basic concept of gender analysis.

**Cyrus:** Totally.

**Tuck:** So what I’m going to do is make the art and the media that I feel like is important for furthering the conversation and helping trans and gender non-conforming people feel seenor understood or challenged, and then if cis people also want to come – there are gender non-conforming cis people – but if, like, cis people who are really secure in their gender and fit really classic ideas of what their gender is also want to come on board and maybe challenge their concepts of gender, that’s great and I would love them to do that. But that’s not my number one goal.

**Cyrus:** Totally. Totally. I think we’re on the same page. [chuckles]

**Tuck:** Great! [both laugh] You have so many fun, delightful, smart thoughts and I feel like it’s really different than the tone of your book, which is really focused on, like, all of your flaws [Cyrus laughs loudly] and, like, codependency and jealousy and mental illness and big Libra energy. Do you have Libra anywhere in your chart? Because there’s like *big* Libra energy in your book.

**Cyrus:** Oh! Will you describe the Libra energy that you feel in the book?

**Tuck:** A lot of this is throughout your life, so I’m not saying this would all apply to you now…

**Cyrus:** Yeah.

**Tuck:** …but you talk a lot about shifting your gender presentation based on people you’re with and people you’re dating, and sort of changing your sense of self based on people that you’re dating, or being codependent with people that you have devotion to, and… having a hard time making decisions because you have all of these contradictory thoughts in your head, and it just sounds like big Libra energy to me! [laughs]

**Cyrus:** Well, yeah, my mom is a Libra.

**Tuck:** [chuckles] Okay.

**Cyrus:** And I definitely have a lot of Libra in my chart. Actually, I’m an Aquarius. But you were saying that interpersonally I’m lovely to interact with, but in my book…

**Tuck:** [chuckles] Oh yeah!

**Cyrus:** …I’m really… depressing. [laughs]

**Tuck:** No! I just think that you showed all of your flaws and all of your sort of worst internal moments, and I’m not saying that was a bad choice, but I just think it’s really nice to get to talk to you and hear joy and levity in your voice, so I’m curious why you chose to write this book.

**Cyrus:** It’s so funny, my editor Jean, who I love and adore, about two-thirds of the way through the writing process was like, “You know, Cy, you *can* be funny sometimes in writing.” [both laugh] Because, she was like, “I don’t get it, like you’re so funny, you’re so light and joyful, like why can’t you show any of that in your writing?” [laughs] And I think so much of the way I’ve experienced my transness or the repression of my transness for many years was having such a compartmentalized and fragmented life that was split between my public performance and my internal self and, like, my interiority. And I was always so able to perform graciousness, charm, charisma, achievement, while also just suffering *so* intensely internally. And then there was a certain point in my early twenties when I kind of couldn’t keep it up anymore, and it broke. I think a lot of people go through that. I started having really, really chronic and debilitating anxiety and pretty ongoing, constant panic attacks, which I tried to write about in the book, and dealing with addiction stuff. And I think a lot of that stuff happened because of just how separate I was keeping my suffering from the rest of my life.

I don’t know if every writer feels this way, but in order to be motivated to write, I really have to feel like my writing is doing some really important internal or psychic work for me, or for someone else that I love, like there’s a lot of – sometimes I write for myself, and I also – because I’m an organizer, a lot of the writing that I do is supporting other people in telling their stories. So there’s a lot of different use for writing, but in my own kind of personal writing, I really need to feel like it’s part of my self-work or processes of growth and transformation. And I think I was – just, like, I haven’t *let* myself really write about my own pain before. So that was what this book was about. This book was about pain, and this book was about feelings of loneliness, and this book was about that secret inner world that I had never let see the light of day. And, like, I could write infinite books that were thousands of pages long about every important relationship in my life that has filled me with love and changed me. But that just wasn’t what this book was about.

I think it was also really important for me to write a book that centered vulnerability and feeling rather than opinions, because so much of the way that trans discourse takes place publicly in culture, especially increasingly as individual people become symbols of this larger, so-called trans movement, is an exchange of opinions and ideas and also that’s so much of opinion culture as it exists on the internet, I think, is about people really centering critique and analysis over feeling. And I just really wanted to write a book that lived in the space of feeling. But hopefully I’ll get to write more books that live in the space of, like, feelings like happiness and joy and interconnectivity, because those are a huge part of my life too, you know?

**Tuck:** Yeah. I would love that. [Cyrus laughs] But yeah, I do feel like that is really important, because all the time we get questions from people who are having this really difficult inner monologue that I think so many trans people or questioning people experience but don’t see reflected outward, because we as trans people are expected to never show any sort of questioning or wavering of confidence in our identities because we have to fight so fucking hard…

**Cyrus:** Right.

**Tuck:** …to make them be seen, and make them be respected, that giving any sort of inch can feel like it’s jeopardizing that, so I think that having that narrative out there is really, really powerful and really valuable, because it does feel like reading your list of top surgery feelings is, like, the most relatable thing on top surgery.

**Cyrus:** Well, what you said is so important, it’s like, if you’re constantly fighting to assert that you’re real and to have people believe your sense of who you are, it doesn’t feel very safe to share doubt. [laughs] And that’s a really unfair bind that a lot of marginalized people end up in, obviously. I tend not to trust people who don’t feel doubt. You know, doubt is a part of everything, and we all deserve to be able to share our fear and our doubt, but there’s not a lot of room for that when the world believes about gender what it does.

**Tuck:** I wanted to ask – you wrote in your book… You talk a lot about fame and, like, fear of fame and fear of how fame corrupts, and you said that “There are parallels between what is disorienting about being known and what is disorienting about being gendered. Both circumscribe what you can or cannot be before you have spoken.” I would love to hear more about that and how you feel like being a member of this famous family, for lack of a better term, affected your ability to transition, because transitioning that publicly sounds so challenging and terrifying to me.

**Cyrus:** Yeah. And I guess I never really – I didn’t *have* to transition publicly. And I guess I didn’t really, but I did make the choice to write a memoir that I’m publishing, so that’s interesting and it is… yet to be determined whether that was a good decision. [Tuck and Cyrus laugh] Check back in with me in six months! [laughs] But yeah, I mean, I think I have, like, opinions about that and then I also have feelings. [laughs] And obviously my opinions and feelings go together, but I’ll try to talk about both.

I think, like, on a structural level, what was really scary and disorienting for me about having someone close to me get really famous was watching the ways in which this person who I knew as, like, a body and a loved one, and who I knew on an intimate level, watching them become an entity or like a… brand or a commodity that existed outside of the person that I knew. Because that’s, I think, what happens when people get famous, right, like I tend to have a pretty – as I said earlier – materialist, commodity-based analysis of things, that’s maybe the Aquarius in me is I, like – that’s like a comfort area for me is to analyze things structurally before I let myself feel things. So I’m very much the alien in the room who’s like, “And now I’m watching my loved one become a commodity, and this many people are profiting off of her and in profiting off of her, she’s becoming, like, this sort of brand entity.” Not to take away people’s individual agency, but I take comfort in a market analysis [laughs] of things. It’s really disconcerting to feel like this gap is growing between the body that you know and love and then the entity.

And at a certain point it clicked for me that, like, what everybody in our culture – in a culture that’s so divided up and organized and categorized according to identity – is dealing with is a deeply felt sense of who one is and how you feel yourself to be, and then everything you’re getting broken up into and read as when you move through space. So it’s like, you can feel a certain way, but then constantly have it be reflected back at you that you’re a woman, and that gap is something that people don’t really have control over, and is really, I think, disorienting for people. So I think I always saw the similarity as just being between, like, how people are read as symbols and then how people experience themselves, and that very rarely those are the same, even if they kind of overlap.

And then in my own experience, I just had a sort of strange experience as someone in my late teens and early twenties of becoming somewhat visible in ways that I hadn’t really consented to or wasn’t totally clear on, and starting to sort of have the experience of being like, oh, there’s these people in the world who know my name. There’s this character that exists publicly who has this name and is a woman and is a lesbian and is the sister of this entity, and I guess that’s me, but I don’t really feel like it’s me? I just feel like it’s an idea that has the same name that supposedly I have. [chuckles] And it made me feel really fragmented and confused and alienated, and it also got mapped onto the ways that I felt about my own girlhood. Because I was like, do I hate that the name Grace Dunham because it’s the name of a girl, or do I hate the name Grace Dunham because it’s the name of this character that I supposedly am that I never consented to being? So I think even when I decided to change my name, there was a lot of confusion about what was rooted in gender and what was wanting to, like, take back my own sense of self from those public processes.

**Tuck:** A lot of times when folks transition and they already had some sort of name recognition, they’ll keep their birth name or dead name – whatever you want to call it – as their middle name. Is that something you did because that name is still really important to you or because you… it was, like, good for branding or a third thing?

**Cyrus:** Yeah. Well, I still haven’t legally changed my name, because I’m a procrastinator.

**Tuck:** Yeah! [both laugh]

**Cyrus:** And it takes time, and I think it’s hard with, like – I do legal work, I work as a legal advocate, and I’ve been stressed out about having to do all the paperwork and figure out, like, do I want my legal name to be the same as my writer name? Do I want to do legal work with a different name than my pen name? There’s certain questions I haven’t resolved for myself. But the main reason I decided to do Cyrus Grace Dunham, it’s not – it was really specific to *this* book, which is like… When I started writing the book, my name was Grace. And when I ended writing the book, my name was Cyrus.

**Tuck:** Mm.

**Cyrus:** And I wanted to honor the fact that both of those names and people made an active decision to participate in the writing process of this whatever, this document, and that at the beginning of the book, I think about myself as Grace, I talk about myself as Grace, people call me Grace. And it just felt right somehow to have both of those names be present in the author. Like, I guess it could’ve just been Cyrus Dunham and then, at the beginning, Grace could’ve been present, but I think so much of the book is about… reckoning with this idea of Grace and what loyalty did I have to her. Am I betraying her? Is she a part of me or was she made up? Like, all of these questions. And something about the title being *A Year Without A Name* felt like the most important part of all, and then the author name felt kind of secondary to that, and I just wanted to honor the space that both of those names had taken up in the process of the book. But I won’t – when I’ve written things since then, I don’t use the middle name Grace. It’s just really specific to what this book means to me.

**Tuck:** The way we always end the show is by asking: In your ideal world, what would the future of gender look like?

**Cyrus:** Oh my god. [laughs] I can’t think about the future of gender without thinking about the end of capitalism, the end of racial capitalism, and the abolition of police and prisons, and, uh, the destruction of the state. Is that okay… to say that?

**Tuck:** Yeah! [Cyrus laughs] Yes, please! Please say that. I would love that.

**Cyrus:** The future… yeah! So that’s my answer. Hopefully the future of gender looks like people having – looking the way they want to and fucking the way they want to and loving the way they want to in the configurations they want to while also supporting one another through mutual aid projects in a world devoid of… yeah, police, prisons, and economic oppression and violence. That – I, you know, I [laughs] – that’s all I’ve got for you! [laughs]

[outro music begins]

**Tuck:** That’s going to do it for this week’s show. If you enjoyed it or learned a thing, please, please, please tell your friend, tell members of your community, tell anyone you can. The only way we grow is by you telling folks that you know about the show, and thank you *so* much for doing that.

You can find Cyrus’s book, [*A Year Without A Name*](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/41716923-a-year-without-a-name), wherever books are sold. I would suggest not Amazon, but do what you gotta do. You can support my work as a full-time professional transgender media human being at [patreon.com/gender](http://patreon.com/gender) or <paypal.me/MollyWoodstock>. Remember, that not only supports the show, it also supports our grant program for trans folks of color. You can also support trans artists and trans organizations by going to <bit.ly/gendermerch>, where we have a variety of amazing merch options. We have Support Trans Media shirts. We have, I think still, four different sweatshirts, including Femmes Can Be Thems and Support Trans Media. You can hang out with us on Twitter and Instagram, we’re at @gendereveal. If you would like to hang out with other trans people, you can do that at <bit.ly/genderslack2>, where you can find our Slack community of hundreds of rad folks who listen to the show and would love to talk about gender with you.

If you would like to buy a Theymail message, you can look for the form to do that in the show notes. If you have any questions about gender, there’s another form in the show notes to submit your gender questions and we will answer them on a future show! You can also get ahold of us with any other questions, concerns, information at genderpodcast.com.

This week’s episode was produced and edited by me, Molly Woodstock. We had production help this week from Isaura Aceves – thank you so much, Isaura, for doing the tape-sync. Also for looking out for me when I was on NPR.

Our logo is by Ira M. Leigh. Our theme song is by the legendary Breakmaster Cylinder. Additional music this week by Blue Dot Sessions.It feels so good to be back, everyone! And be sure to subscribe wherever you’re listening, because we will be back next week with more feelings about gender.

[music ends]

Oh, and someone said they canceled their Patreon subscription for me saying “Throw a brick at a cop,” so, um… throw a brick at a cop.