Tuck: The bistitchual podcast is brought to you by crafty queer Canadians, John and Kelsi. Tune in biweekly for real life rambling, zodiac quizzes, work in progress check-ins, tips, tricks, other fiber tidbits, and an occasional crafty guest to discuss all things yarn-related. Hang out in the bistitchual Discord server to make new queer fiber friends, show off your work, and pop into the bimonthly stitch night. Find them on Instagram @bistitchucalpodcast or at bistitchualpodcast.ca.

[Gender Revealtheme 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 Revealtheme music ends]

Hey everyone. Hope you’re all hanging in there. This week on the show I am very excited to share my conversation with Krys Malcolm Belc, the author of *The Natural Mother of the Child*. Krys’s book is something that we all need more of, which is a memoir about nonbinary parenthood that is *actually good*. It also does a lot of really interesting experimentation with form and archival documents, and I’m really excited for you to read it if you haven’t already. In our chat, Krys and I talk about the book and about the general cultural conversation around transmasculine pregnancy. We also talk about being a trans parent with a trans kid…

Krys (in a clip): Yes, another one! This is my new ally in my own house.

Tuck: About the parallels between pregnancy and gender transition…

Krys (in a clip): There are permanent physical changes, some of which are great, but dealing with the permanent physical changes that I don’t like is somehow shameful.

 Tuck: And about what happens when your cisgender wife starts listening to the podcast, Gender Reveal!

Krys (in a clip): After being with me for literally fifteen years, thank you for saying that.

Tuck: It is a long interview, so we’re going to skip our usual “This Week in Gender” segment, but I do have a quick series of show updates for you. This is our penultimate episode of the season, so we’ll be here this week and next week, and starting in February, Jules and I will be stepping back from releasing new episodes and instead focusing on booking and recording interviews for season… nine. Can you believe we’re on nine? I guess we already had the fourth anniversary of the show and I just ignored it. Anyway, the best way to keep in touch with us while we’re doing this little break between seasons is to sign up for our newsletter at patreon.com/gender. The newsletter is where we’ll be releasing sneak peeks, updates, all that stuff, every week.

Plus, this is hard to imagine, but if COVID numbers suddenly start plummeting and omicron evaporates into the ether, we will start working on live shows again, and newsletter recipients also always get first access to all show tickets. So, the newsletter costs as little as $10.80 per year or $1 per month, and roughly 20% of your donation goes to our grant program. If you do not want to send us a dollar, that’s fine. You can also keep in touch with us on Twitter and Instagram @gendereveal which I do remember to update sometimes, and speaking of keeping in touch, we have a contact form at genderpodcast.com and the next couple of weeks is honestly the best time to pitch to the show because that’s when we plan our… editorial calendar? LOL. So if you’ve got a great guest in mind, or if you think you would make a great guest, feel free to reach out and we will take your name into consideration.

Also, you may have noticed that the merch store has been empty for a couple of months. Thank you for letting me take a break. I am open to bringing the merch shop back *if* enough folks request old designs that they missed out on or, more exciting to me, if I get enough new design submissions that I’m really stoked to run in the store. So, feel free to reach out with requests or merch ideas as well. Again, you can get in touch with us at genderpodcast.com.

Last but not least, we’ve got a Theymail message for you today, and it says, “Looking to reconnect with your body, but loathe diet culture? J, the queer trainer, offers one-on-one virtual movement coaching sessions to help queer and trans folks build strength, improve function, and feel empowered in their bodies. All bodies, identities, and abilities are welcome and services are pay-what-you-can. If interested, email jthequeertrainer@gmail.com. That is the letter J, the queer trainer, at gmail dot com.

[Music starts]

Tuck: Krys Malcolm Belc is the author of the memoir *The Natural Mother of the Child: A Memoir of Nonbinary Parenthood*. He is the memoir editor of *Split Lip Magazine,* and his essays have been featured in *Granta*, *The Rumpus*, *Black Warrior Review*, and elsewhere. Krys lives in Philadelphia with his partner and their three young children, and works as an educator at a pediatric hospital.

[Music ends]

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

Krys: I think I choose ambivalence as a gender. I mostly use the word nonbinary to describe myself when I’m talking to other folks, because I think now that’s a recognizable term, but I sort of use it interchangeably with genderqueer, transmasculine, anything that’s masculine of center but not trans male or man or any of that.

Tuck: Yeah, I was looking at other interviews of you and there were a couple of folks that said like, “This Man” in the headline. Is that just people who didn’t read the book?

Krys: I think it’s editors. I noticed that, particularly in my local paper. I’m pretty sure the interviewer who came to my house for multiple hours to hang out with our family was pretty set on what was going on, but then whoever edited it was like, “This would be a great headline,” and that was the headline online but not the one that ran in print. So I think it was just a weird online editing decision to make more people click on it.

Tuck: Well, it’s really hard to ask you any question that’s not a somewhat invasive, personal question because all I know about you is intimate details about yourself and your family because that’s what you write about.

Krys: But I willingly put those out into the world for strangers to consume, so I’m chill being asked all of it.

Tuck: Yeah, I mean I am interested in that, but I think I’ll actually start by being a narcissist instead, because I was looking for receipts on this and I couldn’t find them. Did we have a conversation about how your wife listens to Gender Reveal and has thoughts on it?

Krys: She does. So, she is a nurse, and she’s always worked locally in Philly, and just had a quick subway ride to work. Then, she took a job out in the suburbs, and now has a 45 minute by car commute, so she started listening to podcasts. And she’d never been a big podcast listener, so she asked me for some recommendations, and I was like, “I don’t know. I’m kind of into this podcast Gender Reveal, but it might be a little too trans or niche for you.” And she not only started listening to it, but also sat me down and was like, “Listen, I know that in the past, we haven’t really talked about gender, and I don’t think we need to now, but I just want you to know that I’m learning a lot and now I’m finally thinking about it,” and I was like, “I’m glad. Thank you for saying that. After being with me for fifteen years, thank you for saying that.” So, it was kind of a moment.

Tuck: I mean how did that feel? To be like, “Okay, after fifteen years, I have now decided because my commute got longer that I can think about gender now”?

Krys: I mean, I can imagine scenarios in which gender would play a different or larger part in relationships that I was in, whether they were intimate relationships or not. But what I will say is that I’ve always known that I was just with a very queer person who was also just very busy with other things. Anna has known that I’m not cis for a very long time, since very early in our relationship. But when I started testosterone, that was when everyone else started kind of being a part of that, and when I told her I decided to take T, she was just kind of like, “Listen, my mom just got diagnosed with cancer. I just had a baby. That all sounds great for you and I hope that that works out well.” It was kind of like, “I’m here for you most of the time. I can’t be here for you now. But that shouldn’t get in the way of your decision to do this medical transition.” So that was just kind of our arrangement, and I think now that our kids are a little older, I have space for things too that I didn’t before, and this is just something that’s wedged into her consciousness, which... I kind of find it cute, honestly. I don’t know. I think other people might be offended that, “What do you mean you’ve never thought about this before?”, but I just kind of think it’s cute, and very cis. I don’t know.

Tuck: It is extremely cis to be like, “I think I’ll wait fifteen years to develop—or really more than that, like my whole life, and then suddenly develop a relationship to gender.” So interesting. Well, if you weren’t having conversations about gender often or at length until recently, I am curious, and also this is something I try to always ask trans parents, but I am curious if you had conversations about gendering your kids. Because obviously, it can feel absurd to assign a kid a gender at birth as if it means anything, and also, obviously, we live in a society. So, yeah, I’m curious how you approached that when your kids were born and how you’re approaching that now?

Krys: Yeah, so I think that there are a lot of really great things about having kids when you’re twenty-five and kind of immature, which was my life decision. I think one of the things that was a part of that was that we kind of chose whatever would be the easiest road for us at the moment, which was to defer thinking about it at that time. I mean, I think that we had conversations that are probably pretty generic queer parenting conversations about not having gendered toys, and not having gendered clothes, those sort of things that are sort of very level one of thinking about this. We never talked about using they/them pronouns. We never talked about intentionally choosing names that were gender neutral. We were kind of just like, “We will tackle this when our kids have consciousness and aren’t pooping their pants all the time anymore.” So, I think that we have grown a lot in how we address it with our kids, but we didn’t do a lot of thinking about it beforehand. And I honestly think that if I had kids now, I would approach it all very differently, and might make different decisions about gendering kids, or how to do it, or how to name them, and how to talk about gender from before birth throughout the childhood span.

I think that the fact that one of our kids identifies as trans and it hasn’t been a big deal…. I don’t want to use them as evidence that my poor parenting wasn’t actually that bad [Both laugh], but I’m kind of like, “They’re doing okay. We have full family conversations about it that seem fine.” I mean, they know trans people; they have books about trans stuff. It’s not like they’re not exposed to it, but we didn’t do it from birth; we waited a little while. And maybe part of that was just, I didn’t know what to say because I still don’t know what to say about my own gender, so it’s hard to be like, “I’m trans, but I’m not going to use myself as the reference because I haven’t made sense of my gender, so that’s not a good reference point, so let’s talk about historical trans people or trans people in the media.” I felt like I couldn’t do it without distancing myself from it, which felt ingenuine in a way.

Tuck: Yeah, I am curious if having a kid come out as trans or identify as trans or anything like that brought up gender feelings in you?

Krys: Yeah, I mean, I guess it’s lucky for our trans kid that my gestational child, Samson, who’s very cis, which I write about in the book, has a feminine flare a little bit, that’s mostly receded, but was very into femme stuff, so I think that ZZ’s lucky in that I did a lot of my work on gender on a cis child, on being like, “Wow, I have a lot of internalized femmephobia that’s really intense, and I’ve never had to think about it very hard in a parenting—” I’ve had to think about it, like making sure as a teacher that I don’t favor boys over girls, making sure I don’t treat my brothers better than my sisters regardless of what’s happening, because I am so averse because of experiences of gendering that I had. So luckily I was like, “Don’t be upset that Samson picks a pink coat.” I started working on it a really long time ago, so I was really prepared.

I had a lot of intense social fears about what it would be like with other kids, that are very much informed by my own experiences of being made fun of and alienated for my gender, and I feel fortunate to be in a major urban area where it’s just not a big deal. My kid’s kindergarten teacher was like, “Never used they/them pronouns before, but I guess I’ll start now.” She was like, “I’m just not going to be 100% on this because I don’t know about this, but I am going to learn about it.” She was very much straightforward about it, and it hasn’t been an issue. So I feel like, yes, we’ve had private conversations about, “How do I not have gender terror when I’m sending my child off to public kindergarten with twenty-five other kids who’ve never met them before and they’re in this very exploratory moment in gender?”

I unexpectedly, I think because it’s my third kid, and I’m tired of all these cis people in my life, I was like, “Yes, another one! This is my new ally in my own house.” So, it’s been really nice and sweet in a way that I think if that had happened when my oldest kid was four or five I just wouldn’t have been ready for it, but now I’m like, “Oh my god, another trans person. We love trans people here in this house. This is *great*!” And we talk about the good things about being trans, and I don’t think I would have known what to say about that five years ago.

Tuck: Well, I think kind of in that vein, a lot of your writing has to do with dysphoria, alienation, misgendering. But you told me that you wanted to talk about the things that are great about having a queer family. I was like, “Hell yeah dude. It seems like everything would be better than having a straight family.” You know? So, do you want to talk about what’s great about it?

Krys: Yeah, it’s so great. Most of the people who’ve interviewed me about the book have been women, and I think that a lot of that has to do with who writes and covers parenting literature. And first of all, I think that there’s so many repetitive conversations about division of labor in the household that I just am *continuously* baffled that this keeps being a thing that straight people can’t figure out. It’s not like Anna and I have it all figured out, but I’m like, “Wow, it’s really like almost every parenting couple we know falls into this exact same trap every single time.” I’m like, “You’d think that you’d avoid some of that or work on it beforehand,” but we don’t have that.

So, I think that has not only benefited getting along in terms of who takes out the trash, but also our kids witness a very gender-all-over-the-place relationship, that I think their main model of what a domestic sphere looks like is pretty queer. And I also think that we talk—although we are a very cishet-aligned queer family, right, like we are legally married, we have kids, we’re also white, middle-class, and we’re homeowners. We have so many things that make us extremely Cleaver-ish in terms of the whole atmosphere of queer people, but we do have explicit conversations about like, there are a lot of problems with marriage and we got married mostly because it’s health insurance, and so our family would accept our relationship. And that’s not a good mode of being as a default, it’s just what we feel like doing—and people have kids at all different ages, lots of people choose not to have them because of cost, and global warming, and I don’t know….

I just feel like I don’t think anything about my own life is superior, so I don’t try to convince my kids that that’s a good way to be. So we talk a lot about people we know in extended queer kinship, or people who are living with roommates for their whole lives, or people who love living by themselves. We just kind of present our family as one option, where I feel like I grew up in a nuclear family where it was expected that everyone would end up in the same situation and I found that very constraining. And also since I knew I was queer young, I was kind of like, “Wow, I’m just never going to be able to do it. I’m not part of society, basically,” because that was my only model. So, yes, I think that that’s like a lot of the joy of queer parenting, is just being like, “We can do whatever we want.” These kids really do listen to, you know, not like they listen to everything we ask them to do, but they listen to things that we say, and that’s where they get a lot their information about what it might mean to be a person or what it might mean for them to figure that out on their own. And I find that very joyful.

Tuck: I do think it’s funny when conservatives are like, “How am I supposed to explain this to my child?” And I’m like, “Your child will get it in 0.1 seconds. It is actually a you thing.”

Krys: Yeah. I mean, I also think that so many of the arguments that, whatever you want to call them, conservatives, make about understanding the queer family, they’re just nonsense arguments that are obviously just constructed to further disenfranchise queer people. There’s all sorts of family structures that aren’t part of the conservative agenda against queerness, and nobody’s ever like, “They could never possibly understand, what if someone’s mom dies and their dad gets remarried?” That’s a different family structure that kids understand even though it’s unusual, but it’s the queerness, and also anything that’s racialized or about immigration. It’s almost just like a made-up thing: What about the kids? Kids can understand whatever is put in front of them and it’s going to be fine.

Tuck: Absolutely. Well, we’ve talked a little bit about you doing a press tour for this book, but you have done a *bunch* of press for this book. I’m curious if there’s anything surprising about how it’s been received either by media or just by the public who is reading it.

Krys: I do think that it’s resonating with exactly who I imagined would consume the book, you know, transmasculine people, especially those who are in intimate partnerships that may include children in the future or present. That’s a very small group of people, but very meaningful group of people. One thing that I’m interested in is, you’re always told not to look at Goodreads, or wherever people leave the comments section for your book. I do wish that I could have prolonged conversations with some people who wrote critical things, not in a, like, I need to argue with them because I’m vain, but I’m interested in some of the things that people have said about the book that maybe I didn’t think about.

You know, people asking questions like, “I just wondered the whole time, how did the author afford this family?” I was like, “Wow, should I write an essay about that? Would that be too much, because I already wrote the book? The book just isn’t, it’s not informative in that way and *so* many ways, since so much of the book is addressed to Anna. That was almost a device to be like, “You’re not given the basic information because you’re speaking as a writer to someone who already knows it,” but I’m like, those are actual real conversations that I think more queer parents should be having. Like people who are able to achieve children, if that’s what they want, should be talking about the cost and the lifestyle and how did they pay for childcare and how’d they decide about family size.

Those are really important conversations to be having that I wish that I could have had in some format, but I don’t know if they belong in the book. And I also think conversations that have interested me and challenged me have been about who’s the audience for the book. Is it trans people? Because I don’t quite think that that is what it is, because the direct address is to cis people, but it’s also not a book that’s explaining transness to cis people, so I don’t know what it is. What is the audience? I’m challenged by that, in that I don’t actually know the answer to that, which I find very interesting and will hopefully help me in future writing projects hone that—or not, or keep being like, “I don’t know and that’s fine.” But I have been interested by those two lines of inquiry, and I didn’t expect that.

Tuck: Yeah. I think it is somewhat vague who the book is for in a way that means that it could actually reach more people. Because trans people can be like, “Oh, this book has some inside baseball and I can see myself in this book in a way that I don’t see myself, perhaps, depending on who you are,” and then also cis people can be like, “This book is written to a cis person and it does explain some things.” I don’t know. I think it’s a really nice middle ground of accessibility, but I am curious because transmasculine pregnancy is something that we do need a lot more conversations about and representation of, but also, like you said, a niche topic for people who aren’t involved in it, so I’m curious what the process of pitching this book was like, and if it was difficult to get people to sign on to it. It’s also experimental in form.

Krys: Yeah. I mean, I truly believed it would never sell, I’ll start by saying that, which was freeing as a writer. I was kind of like, “I’m going to the middle of nowhere, to a writing program, with my family gamely following me for some odd reason that I don’t understand, and I really need to write a substantial project while I’m there.” But then when I finished it, I was like, “Wow, this is pretty weird and I don’t know that it can ever be bought.” So, it was a complete manuscript. It wasn’t pitched. You know, I didn’t sell it on book proposal. I don’t think that an editor who bought this book on book proposal would have been pleased with the final thing, because it just kept getting more weird in terms of its form.

My agent is amazing. The first conversation we ever had when I was kind of agent shopping was like, “You could do two things. You could make it a narrative story about a trans guy who has a baby. That would probably sell, you know, people want that and they want a story that has an arc to it.” And she was like, “Or you can keep it the way that it is, and we can go full-court press on trying to find a home for it.” And the press that picked it up was kind of her first idea. We ended up pitching the book around a lot, and of course, it got rejected—I think every book gets rejected a lot, but it got rejected a lot. Mostly because of the unusual structure, not the content, because I do think that there’s an almost creepy, voyeuristic interest in trans people who have children. But I felt very protected from that because it was in this form, so I was like, “Anyone who accepts the form, I think, is going to be more likely not to turn it into some sort of exploitative story that answers every creepy question that cis people have about this.”

So, I really, truly feel like I lucked out. I’ve gotten to meet and talk to some trans writers because I’m now one of them. You know, I wasn’t a person publishing, really, before. Now I kind of am, so I’m so interested to hear more about this from other people, and how the book changed, and how did you guard yourself if you had a cis editor and a cis agent, or how did it end up being okay if I read your book and I think, “Wow, I’m so happy that this book is in the world and it doesn’t feel like it went down the wayward cis influence path. How did that manage to happen?”

I mean, I will say that I think it’s good for authors to be transparent sometimes about the financial aspects, because I was with an indie press and it was my first book and I had no known track record, I didn’t make a lot of money. I don’t think that this is a book that someone would have bought for a lot of money, because it’s kind of niche. I work full-time at a 9 to 5, so I didn’t really need it to sustain me in a way that other people might. Some people might have to make aesthetic and content choices based on how they need to make a living. I’m a teacher for a living, so that’s how I pay my bills, and my writing moneys, they’re very small and they buy things that we want, not things that we need, so….

Tuck: Your book is on a list that I have, both figuratively and literally, of trans books that I’m really excited about, because of the tone that they take and the audience I think they address, and who I think are doing, if not new things, then at least interesting things. So I’m curious what other books by trans people you’re looking to for past, present, future inspiration, or just ones you would recommend?

Krys: So, to me, the most interesting books are not necessarily books that I read and completely vibe with. I like to have a little bit of, not an argument with, but comments as well as questions, you know. So I’m extremely interested as a white, transmasculine, athletic person in the books by Thomas Page McBee. I am really interested in writing two memoirs, not as something to do, but that as a concept. I encountered his first memoir, *Man Alive*, in grad school, and I read it and I found it impressive that a book that was kind of artsier and not in a narrative trajectory, that it had been published, and it won awards.

And I was really into that, and then I was interested in the way that the second book was in a more traditional narrative structure, and I felt did more explaining about transness than the first book. The first book was very much, like I feel like my book has this, “I’ll tell you what you need to know about transness to stay tuned in,” but it’s not supposed to serve as a Q&A, whereas I felt like *Amateur* did do that sometimes, so I find his career really inspirational. I love his writing. I follow the essays that he publishes as well. I’ve read the books, but I’m also just interested in that decision since I would think it would go in the other direction, right? You’d get more experimental.

I also am really interested in books that are by people who don’t identify as transmasculine but write books that I think have really big transmasculine vibes, so like Alison Bechdel. I am extremely invested in her career. I like visual works obviously, so I’ve followed her career and I’ve read interviews that she’s given where she’s talked a little bit about how gender has changed over time, and she is significantly older than I am, so she has an interesting, I think, relationship to butchness and visible queerness that I’m kind of like, “Would I be like that if I was born a generation before? Or is that me falling into some trap that people have about the meaning of transition in today’s times?” I’m just challenged by that, while I also enjoy the books. And the only book that I read about masculine-of-center pregnancy, that I kind of went to the ends of the earth to try to find stuff, was called *Pregnant Butch*, and it’s a—

Tuck: It’s *the* book.

Krys: It’s *the* book! But’s it’s really transphobic.

Tuck: *Really*?

Krys: Yeah! So I was reading it, and I picked it up because my grad school advisor was a nice cis lady who was super, super, super helpful in terms of learning, “What is memoir? What does memoir do?” I wasn’t a memoirist when I went to writing school at all; I learned on the job, so she was an amazing mentor for me, but she was like, “I think I’ve heard of a book….” So I picked up this book, and I was reading it, being like, “Yeah, you know it *is* hard that people are confused about whether you’re pregnant or not, and it *is* hard that people are uncomfortable asking you questions about your pregnancy, and finding clothes is hard, and it’s hard to figure out what physical feats you can do.”

And then there’s this one double-page spread where the protagonist is on the beach with queer people, in queer community, and notices trans men, you know, transitioned people. People think I’m a trans man, but I’m not, so they could be or could not be, but the artist rendering, it looks like trans dudes. And they are positioned as, “In my day, that wasn’t the path that we took, you know. We decided to stay on this other path of butchness.” So, I was just kind of like, “I’m transmasculine, but not butch.” I’m really not a dudely dude, especially now that I don’t live in the Midwest anymore and wear Carhartt’s just to not get assaulted and stuff, so yeah. I was like, “Wow, but I got so much out of this still, but it’s so transphobic, so how can those two things be in conversation with each other?” I felt very challenged by that.

But then, to get back to actual trans people’s writing, I was challenged by *Detransition, Baby*, and I was interested in talking more about detransition in a frank way. That’s not the job of the novel, but I’m not on testosterone, and I’d gone off around the time the book came out, so I was very in my gender feels, and I was like, “Man, this is hitting so many notes for me.” But also because it’s about a transfeminine experience, it also is very removed from my personal experience, so I felt challenged in a good way. I just like books when I’m not just like, “It’s so good,” but when I’m like, “I just went through it reading this.” So, yeah. That’s a long answer to a short question, but those are some things that had me thinking.

Tuck: That’s great, and I feel like there are so many different parts of that that I want to follow up on, but the thing that I think is distracting me the most is, do you want to talk about going off testosterone?

Krys: Yeah, so I went off testosterone because as is stated in my book, Anna and I have gone back and forth for a really long time over whether to have another baby. I think we always envisioned having a large family—three is not a large family to me; I’m one of six. And she has really, it’s been kind of the singular focus of her dream life to have one more. And I was very much like, “We must destroy all of the sperm that we have frozen because it is a waste of money to keep paying storage for something that we absolutely will not use,” but editing the book, especially those sections where I was confronting ideas of what it means to have been a pregnant person kind of in the before transition times, I was feeling like I had missed out on something that I would have now.

So the decision to have a baby has to do with setting an entire person up for an entire life, whatever that means for them, so it’s not about me and my nine months of vanity, but having any baby at any time is truly a vanity project in a lot of ways no matter how, when you do it, a lot of it is about parental vanity, and I feel like I have achieved a degree of liberation by just admitting that as a base fact about parenting. So, yeah, we had been talking about it, and we had been talking about who would carry, and who’s what age, and who wants to do it, and who’s healthier, just all these conversations. And whether Samson would benefit from having a full sibling, which is discussed in the book too, because he’s expressed feelings of loneliness, just not knowing other kids who were birthed by their dad figure. So I went off T just to see if I would be okay; what would it be like? I wasn’t sure what it would be like to go on, and I waffled about it for literally a decade, and then it was really good to go on, but I didn’t have a bad life before, and I wasn’t very distressed before going on T, so it’s been fine.

I went off; I was like, “I want to see what it’s like for a long time before I make any fertility decisions.” I’ve been writing about fertility stuff because I published an essay about wanting a fourth child recently. So, yeah. I am having infertility struggles that were unforeseen at this point. And I’m fine with the world knowing that, that’s fine, but that’s why I went off T. And I’ve been surprised that it’s been fine to such an extent that I’m always like, “Here’s what I learned from my new transition!” I just keep doing transition events and then having more self-awareness. I think a lot of things were transition events for me, not just deciding to go on testosterone. That’s really just one event out of a huge series of events that I’ve personally gone through. I don’t think of it as being as momentous as maybe cis-facing queer literature makes it out to be. It was just part of a life, but I have discovered that being socially perceived to be male or masculine was obviously the most important part of transition for me, well above what I felt like, or having a period or not, or any of that, because I feel fine.

Tuck: Yeah. I think it is fairly common among people that I know, possibly including myself now that I think about it, that there are transmasculine people who are like, “I am not a man, and I will not use that word to describe myself, but also I did go on testosterone so that people would think that I was a man.” Can you talk to that tension? I think that it’s really common, and I think that if cis people heard us talking about it—not that they’re listening to *this*—but just in general if they heard us talking about it, they’d be like, “Excuse me? I don’t understand.”

Krys: Yeah, to also talk about transmasculine pregnancy as a public spectacle, I remember I started trying to find community before I started trying to get pregnant the first time when Anna was pregnant with Sean. Our kids are very close in age, which I don’t understand why we did that, but that’s what we did. I think I blacked out during that—

Tuck: I heard you did it extremely intentionally!

Krys: Yes! I had to go so out of my way to do it, and yet, I do not know *why* I did it. I think I was so sleep deprived that I was like, “This is fine.” It was tough. But seeing things about people who went public—like Thomas Beatie, to give the most public-facing example, but there are lots of trans guys who’ve done small and large media about their pregnancies since then. So many of the comment section type of takes on that were about how you can’t have it all. “Why does this person think that he can have it all?” “Is he a woman or not?” “He had the transition, but now he also still has to do these womanly things? Why can’t it just be a final decision?” And I’m like, that is very much rooted in misogyny, right? This idea that people should have to bend their whims to some societal idea of who should have children. It’s all really just about hating anyone with a certain reproductive system, which is very dismal and grim.

That’s just one thing that I’m always thinking about in terms of being male-presenting. Even though I think it benefits me personally in a lot of ways, I also think that there’s backlash to it that is still predicated on people still thinking that I’m a woman no matter what I do, and that’s very deeply rooted in anti-transmasculine stuff, no matter how much someone is interviewed by the press, and they’re like, “No, I’m really a man. I’ve always felt that way, and look, here’s a picture of me as a tomboy toddler, whatever, whatever.” There is no lengths that transmasculine people can go to where they won’t be still seen as a woman by some people, whether you’re stealth or not, whether you have bottom surgery or not. None of that actually matters once someone knows you’re trans if they hate trans people, or they hate women, or both.

To answer just the “why transition, and want to be perceived as a dude?”, I did have the feeling throughout my entire life that people were staring at me. I think I just had a more masculine presentation than people were comfortable with, and I spent a lot of my early adulthood really leaning into androgyny, dressing extremely masculinely, and presenting way more masculinely than I feel I do now. Because I was like, “Well, it didn’t work when I was literally at an all-girls Catholic school wearing a kilt and knee socks with a long blonde ponytail.” That did not reduce the staring. I still get the exact same vibes from people, no matter what I do, and I was just kind of like, “I have a loving family. I have friends. I have people who understand me.” I had talked about being nonbinary for a long time with people close to me before deciding to take testosterone, and I was like, “It’ll just ease something that is so disruptive and distracting to me for no reason.” I’m like, “I’m not making a societal statement. I just don’t want to feel antagonistic eyes on me at all times.” I was really tired of people asking, “Are you a boy or a girl?” Not in a bad way. I was just so exhausted by these interactions that I was like, “I could just do a better job serving my community as a teacher, being a parent, being a person, having time for hobbies, volunteering, if I didn’t have all this mental energy taken up by trying to figure out who’s staring at me.”

So that’s why I decided to do it, and I just felt such an immense sense of relief that people weren’t staring at me anymore, that I did feel guilty that I had somehow escaped something other people can’t escape, if they’re like, the reason that they’re stared at is because they’re an amputee. But me not taking testosterone doesn’t give someone their limb back. And now I work in a workplace where, you know, I work in a pediatric oncology clinic, so many of my patients appear very different, and they’re never going to look like their peers. But I’m actually able to do my job, and talk to these people, because I’m not paranoid everyone’s looking at me all the time! That was so invasive, that I think it was a good decision that I felt a lot of guilt about, and I think that the guilt about it is also a common feeling that people don’t talk a lot about. I used to be visibly queer, and that was so difficult, and now people don’t—I mean, people assume I’m a gay dude all the time now, but—

Tuck: I was like, you have a lip ring! I don’t know. [Tuck laughs]

Krys: No, I know! Yeah, I had to start coming out as straight sometimes. I’m not straight, but I had to start being like, “My partner’s actually a woman,” when people would use he/him. I would say my partner is a nurse, and people would be like, “Where does he work?” And I’m like, “It’s actually a lady.” [Krys laughs] The cis-est lady ever.

Tuck: Famously cis woman, Anna Belc.

Krys: Famously cis. *So* cis. Yeah, I think my life has gotten a lot more open ended since I became more binary appearing, which is really weird, but it’s just the truth for me.

Tuck: Yeah. Thank you so much for talking about that; I think it was really great. And I’m going to now tangent off to something that I was reminded you said earlier, which was that you were wearing Carhartt’s to fit in. I thought we were wearing Carhartt’s because they’re fun and hot.

Krys: I mean, I think that in Philadelphia, I would be doing it to look cool and very gay, and in rural Michigan, I was doing it to appear male. I kind of just adopted the male uniform of the upper peninsula of Michigan. I moved to Michigan, I think I was four months on T, and in Philadelphia, I was just still some queer person that I am now, and I was my whole time—like it’s just a major city, and it’s super queer here, like all the communities I’ve lived in. So I wasn’t expecting to get to Michigan and suddenly be male 100% of the time. It was overnight, I was just a man. And I was like, “Wow, I don’t have any of the body language or clothing style for people to be calling me dad, and talking to me about tools, and I just don’t have the skillset, so I’m just going to really butch it up.” So I, I think my affect and the way that I dressed and acted were extremely male in public during that time, just to—I don’t know. I was a little afraid. In a way that in Philly, I was afraid someone would call me a lezzy on the street which is not…. [Krys laughs] Everyone’s yelling at someone here. That’s not going to be harmful to me; it’s just irritating. Versus being like, “Man, I just do not feel so hot in this situation that I’m in, and I need to appear like all the other dudes here.”

Tuck: Yeah, I mean, to be clear, I was joking. [Krys laughs] But, yeah, it does illustrate what we’ve talked about before on the show, a lot last season, about gender being a localized project, because you can have the same presentation in Philadelphia and in Michigan, and be read completely differently. Anyways, so you have talked about your different many transitions. You’ve talked in the past about the similarities between pregnancy and gender transition. Obviously, those things were connected for you, but just more broadly that they have parallels. I’m wondering if you can talk about those similarities?

Krys: Yeah. I talk about this a lot with cis mom friends, and it kind of blows their mind a little bit because I think that I see a lot of discourse on mom social media that I am kind of a part of, and kind of outside of in a lot of weird ways, about how it’s uncomfortable or less commonly talked about to discuss permanent physical changes due to pregnancy and childbirth. Like the fact that sex might be painful for a while, or you might pee yourself, or you always look a little different. I think a lot of women talk about that with other women who’ve had children and are like, “But it’s not a public conversation, or it’s awkward between me and my partner, or I don’t talk about it with my doctor.” I just think that there’s this huge hang-up about talking about making a decision; there are permanent physical changes, some of which are great, like you birthed a child, and they’re a whole human that you created, and they’re completely outside yourself. That’s great, and you can like parts of parenting, or all of parenting. You can be the most enthusiastic parent ever, or an ambivalent parent, whatever. You can like it to whatever degree you want, but then there’s this *but* dealing with the permanent physical changes that I don’t like is somehow shameful.

And I think that in a lot of ways that’s similar to some conversations about transness. It was really strange to some people I’ve talked to when we’ve had really intimate conversations, with some cis friends about my decision to take testosterone, being like, “I really didn’t want bottom growth.” That was something that I was very put off by as an idea, and was a large barrier to me deciding to take testosterone was the unknown of that. But I’m still happy I took T, right! I could make a decision to do something, and it can ultimately be correct, and it can have physical ramifications that I either feel ambivalent about or don’t like. Humans are very complex. But I think pregnancy, and motherhood specifically, and transitioning your gender, are posited as these things where you have to like it, because it’s a choice that you made. So if you chose to do it, you have to like no matter what happens.

And I’m like, “That’s so not how people work.” I don’t know why we’re pretending people work like that, but they don’t, so I feel very comfortable talking about things I don’t like about hormones or things that are weird, and that doesn’t mean…. I think everyone should be able to go take T if they want. I think it’s a lot less of a big deal than people make it out to be, and it’s a lot of scare tactics, and whatever, but I also think that I shouldn’t have to pretend that I like everything about it. Yeah, and I feel the same way about pregnancy. I’m glad Samson exists, and I am glad, ultimately, that I had him, and that I decided to do it, and no, I don’t like that my hips are permanently wider, and I don’t like that I have weird pain doing some exercises that maybe PT could help, but I haven’t done that. It’s just complicated in a way that’s fine, you know?

Tuck: Yeah. I was just on a panel about fixing trans stereotypes in journalism, and I was saying that it was really important to only interview trans people for trans stories, and that if you wanted two opposing viewpoints, you could just find two people that disagreed with each other who are both trans. And this is a perfect example of that, because I’m like, I, personally, believe that bottom growth is the hottest thing in the world, and one of the best things that anyone of any gender can do for themselves, and I think it’s really important that you did the “I Don’t Like Bottom Growth” representation here on the show. Thank you for being my head-to-head counterpoint on this divisive issue. Anyway—

Krys: Well, it connects to my book too, because there’s a brief thing where I talk about making Anna look at my stitches after I gave birth, because one of my ultimate paranoias about giving birth was that I would have genital changes. Not like I didn’t want pain or leaking; I was like, “I have the best fucking vulva and vagina ever, and I do not want any changes to happen to it. I’m happy with it the way that it is.” So that’s another way that transition and pregnancy are related. Yeah, I think having people who have opposing ideas about it is so good, and actually for me, very artistically generative. When I was talking about books that challenged me earlier, I was very lucky in my—I went to a graduate program in creative writing, and there were only five people in my cohort, and three of us were trans.

And one of the other writers, Alex, who’s an amazing essayist and photo essayist, we would make similar art, and we were in this graduate program in Michigan together at the same time which is…. Nobody gets that opportunity to be in such a small artistic community with someone really on their wavelength in so many ways, but he’s a binary trans guy, and we had very different relationships to some of the aspects of being a trans person, and transitioning, and hormones, and surgeries, and we were able to have really frank conversations about that. Even if they didn’t make it into my book, that was the atmosphere I was in when I was writing the book. I’m in this extremely rural and isolated place where I’m afraid sometimes, but I have this other trans artist that I literally invite over for coffee, and we write late into the night and talk about all this stuff. It is amazing to have disagreement with other trans people, and I wish that more cis people who consume trans art and trans media were either witness to that, or like aware that we don’t all think the same, or that I am not representative of trans people who gave birth. I’m just one person who did it, and it’s really about me, and not anyone else. I think that that would be very beneficial for cis people to witness.

Tuck: Yeah. I think it’s challenging because the second we don’t seem like we’re all on the same page, it’s easy to be like, “They don’t even know what they want! They don’t know what they’re talking about! Why should we give them rights?” But, yes, you’re absolutely correct and I agree with you. Okay, this is the part of the show where I ask what you want to talk about that we haven’t talked about yet?

Krys: I mean, because I think your show has a very trans audience, and I like the idea of trans people having complicated conversations where there’s disagreement, I had so many complicated back-and-forths with myself about including childhood images of myself in girls’ clothes in the book, and what that would mean, and whether I would be playing into people’s desire to see a before and after. Because I know that cis people just look at pictures, and they’re like, “That was an ugly girl, so good thing they transitioned.” People just say the most outlandish things that they know are the perfect bad thing to say. So much transphobia is predicated on “I know exactly the wrong thing to say, and here it is.” But I think for me, I decided that those pictures are still images of a trans person, because that is who I am.

I’m working really hard on framing my childhood as a trans childhood, retroactively, in order to better support my trans child. To be like, “You’ve been trans your whole life. You just weren’t given the tools and language to explore that.” So part of that for me has been accepting that an image of me sitting on a carousel in a dress is an image of a trans person, and that it’s just as valid as if my parents had said, “You know what, you don’t like to wear this and you never have to again, and I don’t want these images of you.” So much of my writing in the book was just sitting and looking at these pictures over and over again, and being like, “What do they mean?” You know? I’m really interested in trans people’s takes on images of themselves.

I’ve seen lately going around the—I’m in a Facebook group for trans kids, but going around the rounds is this thing where you can alter and touch up childhood images to make them the correct gender, you know, take images of your child who is boy-appearing, but now you know your child’s a girl, so you’re going to make your boy-child look like a girl-child, is a sort of the problematic framing of this. It’s so interesting, and every time I’d share—I’ve seen it on Twitter, and I’ve seen it–—They *love* it. The cis *love* it.

Tuck: It’s so violent!

Krys: They’re like, “This is the best! Finally, I can put a picture of my child on the mantle because it doesn’t look like the wrong gender.” And I’m like, “What if you’d have given your child agency at that age?” I was talking earlier about how Samson had this very prolonged femme phase, and now he looks like he’s about to walk out onto a soccer field twenty-four hours a day, and just—he has long hair still, but it’s blonde bro vibes. But am I going to be like, “Let me touch up this picture of him wearing a frilly dress”? No, I’ll be like, “There are a lot of pictures of you. What do you feel when you look at this, and can I put it on the wall? Do you want it private? Do you want me to put it away? Do you want me to get rid of it?”

All of those are valid options, but people are desperate to have their personal parenting have a redemptive arc, instead of, you’re just a person in this person’s life, and you need to actually do repair when you’ve done harm. And it’s not for your own personal validation that you’re a good parent, but in fact, because your child is a person outside of you. That’s very cis. I just get so viscerally upset when I see these redacted images that I’m like, “Just repair, and move forward. Don’t go back and try to make yourself out to be someone you weren’t. That’s not helpful.” Which is why I write about all the shitty and abusive things that I’ve done, even if I did it more obliquely than maybe I would have liked to. It’s fine to be like, “I was shitty sometimes, and I’m really sorry, and I want to be better, and I don’t want you to say that it’s okay because it’s *not*.” Like, real apologies. I think that trans people want *real* apologies from cis people who have harmed them, not to be weirdly manipulated into saying that it’s okay.

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

Krys: I knew you were going to ask this, obviously. I’ve listened to the show. I think what I would love to see is a world in which trans people were allowed to have very complicated feelings, and change our minds, and make mistakes, and harm people, and have failed relationships, and also have all the joys and great things, and not have to feel like that’s a commentary on the validity of our gender. I just feel like obviously all of the trans people that I’m in community with in various ways are fully realized humans, because we’re people. But the public face that I sometimes feel I have to put out there as an artist, and at work, and sometimes even in my family, is like, of being well-adjusted even when things are hard or weird or complicated or I don’t know…. And I just want us all to be able to just have a life that isn’t great, and to not have to put on a certain affect in order to be deemed successful at being a trans person.

I don’t want my life to have to strive towards success as a trans person. I just want to be able to live a fully realized life, and I think that now that I have a kid who’s exploring their gender, they’re cantankerous and moody and sometimes very argumentative and they’re stubborn and they’re creative and they’re into reading. They’re a fully realized human and I just want their whole life to be open to that, but I just know that it’s not there yet, so I want us to hustle towards that. Which I think is a motivating factor to talking about how going public and talking about how complicated it is about trying to allow other people to do that, to just live it, without having to be like, “Well, you know, I’m still just a regular person,” to just rest it would be fantastic. So that my trans child could just have friendships go bad, and other life adventures, and it’ll be okay.

[Gender Revealtheme music starts]

Tuck: That’s going to do it for this week’s show. You can find Krys at krysmalcolmbelc.com and grab a copy of his book at bookshop.org. He also has a chapbook that is available from *The Cupboard*. That’s linked in the show notes as well. We are at genderpodcast.com where you can find transcripts of every episode and other useful resources. We’re also on Twitter and Instagram @gendereveal. You can support our show and the work we do here and sign up for our weekly newsletter all at the same time at patreon.com/gender.

Today’s episode was produced and edited by Julia Llinas Goodman and by me, Tuck Woodstock. Our logo is by Ira M. Leigh. Our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder. We’ll be back next week with more feelings about gender.

[Gender RevealTheme Music Ends]

Krys: But yeah, I guess if people want to find me, they can, unfortunately, find me. They won’t find much of value here in my house. They can take a lot of Legos, if they want to come rob the Lego stash house of Philadelphia. [Both laugh]