# Gender Reveal Episode 136: Sabrina Imbler

**Tuck:** Urbody is a gender-affirming underwear and activewear brand that designs gender inclusive collections by and for the community that address the fit, functionality, and style needs of those across the gender spectrum. Urbody created its own sizing and grading system that’s built to fit trans, non-binary, and gender-nonconforming folks. Use code tuck15 for 15% off your first Urbody purchase. Shop based on fit and style, and remember that you deserve to get dressed for the day with confidence, and that starts with what’s underneath.

[Gender Reveal theme music plays]

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

[Theme music ends]

**Tuck:** Hey everyone, hope you’re hanging in there. This week on the show I am very excited to share my conversation with Sabina Imbler. Sabrina is possibly best-known as the creative genius behind such *New York Times* headlines as “When an Eel Climbs a Ramp to Eat Squid from a Clamp, That’s A Moray.” But you will soon know them as the creative genius behind *How Far the Light Reaches: A Life in Ten Sea Creatures*. *How Far the Light Reaches* is of course Sabrina’s exquisite debut memoir, and it comes out tomorrow, December 6th. In this episode, Sabrina and I talk about the process of writing that book.

**Excerpt of Sabrina:** And then I was like, oh, hydrothermal vents, like there’s probably a creature that lives on a hydrothermal vent that looks like a little bit queer.

**Tuck:** We also talk about Neopets, transsexual sea creatures, the *New York Times* standards desk (boooo!), and at one point I got the conversation here somehow.

**Excerpt of Sabrina:** If I were given the opportunity to fuck in the Bermuda Triangle, like it would be so fucking weird if I didn’t.

**Tuck:** But before we jet off to the Bermuda Triangle, a few housekeeping notes. First of all, I am taking next week off. Actually off, like no work. Hopefully. So there will not be a new episode out next week, December 12. I am letting you know, so that first of all, you can really savor this one or whatever. But also because I want you to know that if you really need some good, good gender content, for whatever reason, you can subscribe to our Patreon where we will be releasing a bonus podcast filled with stuff that we cut out of this episode. More on that at the end of the show, but in the meantime, just know that we publish at least one bonus episode per month at patreon.com/gender. Also, I just remembered that every Sagittarius season I put out our mailing address just in case anyone wants to say hi, maybe put us in your holiday card rotation or whatever. So, our current mailing address may have changed since you last heard this. It is at P.O. Box 2186, Astoria, New York 11102. It is also listed at genderpodcast.com/faq. And we’d love to hear from you—no presh, no presh. I also want to issue a little correction. Two weeks ago I was talking about the US midterm results, and I counted the number of transgender state elected officials who were up for election or re-election, which was eight. Then I lost track of what I was talking about, and I incorrectly said that that was the total number of trans people in statewide office in the country. Of course that isn’t true, because some representatives simply were not up for reelection this year. For example, Danica Roem, like one of the most famous state representatives. So there are more than eight trans people in state office. Sorry about that. Sorry to lie to you. Still not a ton though. Okay. And speaking of past This Week in Gender segments, just a reminder, December 5th is the last day to fill out the US Trans Survey. So if you’re listening today, December 5th, haven’t done that yet, head to ustranssurvey.org right now. And now, it’s time for This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender music plays]

**Tuck:** So, this week I am handing the reins over to a previous This Week in Gender contributor. If you listened to last season’s finale episode, you heard a little update from Carl Charles over at Lambda Legal. And Carl recently posted about an interesting trans legal happening. And I messaged him and was like, hello, I do not understand the law, can you please send a voice memo explaining what happened? And he did. He was so nice about it. And as a treat, it includes a little bit of Supreme Court gossip. So here’s Carl.

**Carl:** Hello Gender Reveal, my name is Carl Charles, and I’m a trans attorney working with Lambda Legal out of Atlanta, Georgia, and I’m sending along this voice memo to share some good news, which is that on Wednesday, November 30th, ten transgender attorneys were admitted to practice in front of the Supreme Court. This effort was organized by the National Trans Bar Association, which is an association that exists to support trans and nonbinary attorneys, and was organized at least in part in response to the comments of Justice Gorsuch about the existence of transgender people in the Supreme Court courtroom itself, back in 2019 during the Bostock oral arguments. This event holds both practical and symbolic importance. Practically, what it means is that these ten people who were admitted to the Supreme Court can now practice in front of that court, can be counsel of record, can represent clients, and that is practically very significant because it increases the number of trans people who can do so by ten.

And it also holds symbolic importance. For a few minutes on Wednesday, November 30th, the nine justices of the Supreme Court looked face to face, very close, I might add—the courtroom is much smaller than I realized—they were face to face with ten transgender people. Ten very accomplished transgender people with a variety of lived experiences, from a variety of places, and that is incredibly important. We certainly were not the first trans people to be admitted to practice in the Supreme Court, but I’m really happy that we also won’t be the last. But I think it was a really meaningful experience for all of us. I will just share that Justice Brown Jackson was absolutely beaming at us. She was giving us the biggest, most welcoming smile from the end of the bench where she was sitting. I also received really warm looks and nodding approval from Justice Sotomayor and Justice Kagan, and notably, Justice Sotomayor was wearing a mask. She was the only justice to be wearing a mask, and she was expressing her support for us in nonverbal ways, and it was a really special and significant moment, and I’m really honored to share with you Gender Reveal, and with your listeners. So thank you very much.

**Tuck:** Thank you so, so much to Carl for sending this in. I really appreciate these exclusive insights, and I am so happy for all of you. Congratulations! This has been, This Week in Gender.

[This Week in Gender music plays]

**Tuck:** We’ve got two TheyMail messages for you today. TheyMails are little messages from listeners that we read on the show. We’re actually, I think, all caught up, so this is a great time to buy one. If you have someone or something to shout out, you can get a TheyMail message via the link in the show notes. Today’s first message is from J Ko, and it says, “Do you need help navigating a tricky group convo? Maybe you’re stuck in an endless consensus process, or you need backup when cis people say wild shit at your staff retreat. Some Tending offers facilitation support for groups. We’d love to support other trans folks in the new year. Reach us at sometending.org.”

Our other message is from Jordan, and it says, “REACH is the debut album by Urge Surfer, an electropop duo from Buffalo, New York featuring transfemme multi-instrumentalist Jordan Smith and vocalist Chelsea O’Donnell. Composed via email over the course of the pandemic, REACH is now available via Spotify, Apple Music, Bandcamp, and all major streaming services. Listen to their first single ‘Cursed’ today.” And this is Tuck editorializing to say that I am listening to “Cursed” right now, not right now as I’m recording, but right now as I was writing, and it does, in fact, slap. Would recommend.

[Gender Reveal theme music plays]

**Tuck:** Sabrina Imbler is a staff writer at Defector Media, where they cover creatures. Their first book and essay collection about sea creatures, called *How Far the Light Reaches*, will be out on December 6th with Little Brown.

[Theme music ends]

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

**Sabrina:** I would say on forms, I always click non-binary, but in my heart and in my aspirations, genderqueer.

**Tuck:** Hmmm.What’s the difference to you, or the distinction?

**Sabrina:** I guess I read this great essay, I think it was in *The Baffler*, by this writer Alex Green, about the commodification of nonbinary, and I feel like the way that I most often encounter that word is like, I don’t know, like in a Tomboy X ad of nonbinary tank top, like nonbinary hat! [Tuck laughs] And it just like, kind of becomes like word salad to me. Like I don’t really know what it means, and I want to be in opposition to yeah, I guess like corporate nonbinary. And I love words that are like two words stuck together. I think that’s really fun. I also like the idea—genderqueer feels to me like a challenge. Like how today will I queer my gender, and something that I’m sort of constantly improvising.

**Tuck:**  Yeah, wow, I love that. I transitioned, question mark, right at the time where genderqueer and nonbinary were sort of vying for popularity. So I started at genderqueer, and then when nonbinary became sort of the word du jour, I was like okay, that’s the one people know, so that’s the one I’ll use. And I love you being like, wait, why would you choose the one that everybody uses? Like that’s a wild thing to do. And I’m like, oh wait, oh huh, great point.

**Sabrina:** Dare to be different, dare to be quirky!

**Tuck:** That’s so funny. Well, speaking of the queer of it all, before your current book that we’ll talk about later, you published a book called *Dyke (Geology)*, and I wanted to ask what dyke means to you. I assume there’s possibly more than one thing.

**Sabrina:** Oh yeah, so that came out of like a college project, where I needed to write a book, or I needed to do an assignment of some kind. And I had recently come out, I loved the word. Dyke is a very cool word. I just feel like in terms of the letters, I love y’s, more words should have y’s. And I was on the Wikipedia for “dyke,” because I don’t know, I was newly gay, and I was like, let me find out the history, let me research this. And you know how Wikipedia pages, like if one word has multiple meanings, they’ll sort of have like a disambiguation page, so it’s like, dyke, and then it lists all of the different meanings of dyke. And I was stunned, because I had only ever heard it in the context of like, the community word, the “slur.” And I didn’t know that it was also like a geologic term to refer to like a fissure or like a rock that forms an opposition to another rock. And I was like, that’s so cool. And I went on the dyke page, and there were—it was just like so weird to see this word that I have such a strong connotation with just like used in these wildly different contexts, like a lot of the big dyke formations on earth will have names. So there’s one called the Great Dyke of Zimbabwe. Like, what an iconic name!

**Tuck:** I love her! How do we meet her?

**Sabrina:** Yeah! I’m just like, imagining her like on her motorcycle, like there’s some spikes on her jacket, probably. And then I was like, oh what about lesbian? What about Lesbos? Let me look into that. And that’s how I learned that the island of Lesbos has this really big, like is very known for its petrified wood, which is very cool. But yeah, I think it was just like I was on Wikipedia, I saw that there was like a comet, an asteroid, like all these different things that also sort of shared this connotation, and I was like, what if I put us all into community with one another, and sort of saw what connections formed.

**Tuck:** Mm, yeah. In January of last year, you tweeted, “I have been using they/them pronouns in my private life, and it has felt sublime. Please use them for me moving forward. Relieved for this to no longer be a secret I think about every day for the past [redacted] years lmao.” Um, as a gay millennial in a liberal enclave, were you really keeping this a secret for years? And if so, why?

**Sabrina:** I guess, like many people who maybe are in like the group, or near the group transmasc, I feel a lot of affinity to Danny Lavery’s, I think post, that was like, oh I’m going to think about testosterone all the time, but like I never will take any of it. Like I’ll never, yeah, dip my toe into that pool. And I think like, I don’t know, maybe it was because I started using the internet when everyone was getting canceled all the time, and that was my deepest fear of like, being canceled, and I never wanted to appropriate anything. And so then I think I was just like, I need to really prove to myself that like I can identify as nonbinary. Like use they/them and not feel like I’m taking up space from like, yeah, this “finite” amount of space that just simply doesn’t exist. Even in college, I’d be like, yeah, I would love to get top surgery, but that’s simply not for me. Or just like, I don’t know, it’s something that I’ve thought about for like five years, and I think my little maggot brain was just like, that’s just what everyone thinks about. Like of course everyone would opt into that if we all had the chance, but there are only some people who are deserving. Yeah, I don’t know. And like so many other people, I was like, if anyone else wants to use they/them, like I support you fully. Like you are valid, and I see you, but like, me, never. But now I’m in therapy. [Tuck laughs]

**Tuck:** I was going to ask, how did it change. All right, fair fair fair. Incredible.

**Sabrina:** I mean also, I don’t know, the pandemic, I think just being alone with myself, there were a lot of things that I did every day to exist in public life that were sort of staples of my identity for a long time. Like I have really thin eyebrows, and I would always like draw these really thick—I would like paint really thick eyebrows on and I’d be like, okay. Like, I’d look at that face in the mirror and be like, this looks good, I think. And then I would go out and like have my really big eyebrows and like, that was like my thing. I had eyebrows. And then when I was like, you know, working from home and alone in my apartment with my roommates, and I just didn’t put my eyebrows on. And then, you know, I was like, oh, do I actually like this? Like have I just sort of been doing this because I decided like this was a part of who I was? And you know, I never thought to question whether I wanted that. And I felt like there were a lot of other things related to gender presentation that sort of like evaporated. And then I was like, oh I don’t actually want them back. I actually feel much better without them.

**Tuck:** Mhmm. Interesting. You describe your work as the Creature Beat. There are other words you could use to describe those beings—why do you use the word creature specifically?

**Sabrina:** Yeah, I guess, like other people who I know who sort of have this beat, they’ll say, oh I write about all forms of life, or like I write about biology, or some people specifically will say like, I write about animals. And I feel like each of those terms can be right for that person. But I feel very drawn to the word creature, because I think it implies a kind of strangeness, and like a difference. Like when I think animal, I think dog or horse or panda. And when I think creature, I think like strange little scorpion, or like little spider with like a little eye on its back, or like a worm that, you know, it’s like 30 inches long and like lives inside a sunfish. And I really like the work that it does, of like, when you read a creature story, you’re going to learn about some little creature that you’ve maybe never heard of before, and like, you’re going to see how it lives its life, like what it eats, what it wants, or at least what it lives for. And I like the strangeness in the term.

**Tuck:** Yeah, much like genderqueer, right? You’re like, creatures, the genderqueer of animals. [Both laugh]

**Sabrina:** Exactly, yeah. We’re not like other animals.

**Tuck:** Yeah, exactly. Well, you said to me that you are against the human-animal binary, and we love to talk about false binaries here on Gender Reveal, so I was just wondering if you could say more about this, this false binary, and maybe how, in the words of your book, shoehorning distinctions between ourselves and other animals often harms both of us.

**Sabrina:** Yeah. I mean, I think the human-animal binary, I mean it comes up in all senses of like, the world, I think in the way that we think about, you know, who deserves to live in a city. Like, I feel like we often think about like, oh we built this, this is for us. But of course, there are all these other animals like also here. And when I read different scientific studies that are sort of putting animals to various cognition tests, like you know, you put a goldfish into a maze and you see if it can complete it. Like, I just read this story about goldfish, and there’s this team of scientists earlier this year that like put a goldfish into a tank of water on wheels, and then like trained the goldfish to drive the water tank.

**Tuck:** What!

**Sabrina:** Like it was a little car. And they were like, look, goldfish can navigate. And I’m like, what? Who is this test for? And they were like, see, goldfish are intelligent. And it’s like, yes, they are. But this is one of the silliest like tests that I’ve ever heard of. Like goldfish intelligence just looks different than our own intelligence. And I feel like we are constantly putting creatures and other animals like up to our own standards of like, well, this is how we define intelligent, because this is what intelligence looks like for us, or like this is what we consider good vision or whatever, because it’s like similar to ours. And I really find that binary frustrating and limiting in the ways that we’re able to understand like the various other life forms that share the planet with us. And I think I’m also very interested in thinking about myself as an animal.

Like when I think about my own evolutionary reactions to things, like, one of the things that I’ve been trying to do in my own life is like unlearn the bias I have against bugs, because I think that I grew up very scared of them. And like, they, you know, have lots of little legs sometimes, and they like crawl up you. And some bugs like, you know, ticks, like do want to do me harm, but a lot of them are just trying to live their lives, and like I realize, like so why is my instinct to want to smush them, right? And I understand that part of the reason why I am scared of bugs, and I like have that sort of skin crawling reaction is because I, as an animal, evolved to not want parasites. Like I don’t want to be parasitized, I don’t want ringworm, or like I don’t want a mosquito to drink my blood and possibly give me a disease. And so I have all these sort of evolved reactions and instincts in me, but like I still can sort of work against them for like the bugs that live in my house with me that don’t cause me any harm, or like don’t want to eat my food. Yeah, just trying to appreciate animals, like across those differences, and think about like, is this fear something I learned from society? Is it something that ancient humans like evolved to have?

**Tuck:** Mmhm. So much of your writing uses the natural word as this analogy or metaphor, thinking about both *How Far the Light Reaches* and *Dyke (Geology)*, and just articles you’ve written. But a lot of people would write a memoir *or* a story about creatures. And so many of your stories are like, this is about me fucking someone, but it’s also about a volcano. [Sabrina laughs] This is a story about trauma, but it’s also about a jellyfish that I met. You know, and like, those aren’t necessarily actual real examples, but they’re close to them. So I’m curious what that impulse is to be like, I do want to talk about both these things, and I’m going to put both of them into every story instead of, separate those two beats out into two separate stories.

**Sabrina:** I mean, I think in some way I’m doing what like... I’m kind of using a very old strategy that a lot of people do of like, oh I’m reading my own life through this cultural object, like a book, or like a movie, or like a very beautiful painting of a horse. But I’m just using like, creatures as the lens through which to understand myself and also them. And I think part of my impulse to do that, is like I don’t know, I’m young. I like, have lived a pretty comfortable life, and I don’t have, like, I don’t know. I’m sometimes very bored by my own story and my own experiences. And I think it feels very like, limiting and shallow to sort of only write about myself. And part of the reason I find it so generative to sort of pair my experience with like a creature, is I do feel like there just are these unexpected like resonances or glimmers of similarity or difference that sort of inform the other, and like crack open new questions in ether story that like I wouldn’t have though of on my own. And I do think it is like, I don’t know, treating myself like an organism and the creature as like a character in the way that you know, we are both, like we’re both organism and character in this situation. I don’t know, I think my brain just like, works in metaphors.

Like the first idea that I had for the essays in the book was about the octopus, which is this deep sea octopus, graneledone boreopacifica, which I know how to pronounce because I emailed the scientist [Tuck laughs], and he sent me a voice memo, and I was like, that’s now how I thought it sounded, but thank you. And it’s this deep sea octopus that basically scientists from the Monterey Bay Aquarium Research Institute saw swimming toward a sea cliff like thousands of feet below the sea to lay her eggs and then brood them, which means just sitting on the eggs and protecting them and aerating them with oxygen. And they sent an ROV like multiple times over the course of 53 months to check up on this octopus, and she was there, like alive, every single time for like four and a half years, just sitting on her eggs and not eating. And in my mind, I just like fixated on this story of the octopus. And I think I couldn’t help but like think about the parallels that I felt with my own mother and my own life, and like our sort of shared relationships to disordered eating.

And I feel like that first obvious parallel then made me wonder like, oh, like are there any other obvious parallels between me and the creatures that I’ve learned about in nature documentaries, or like have met on the beach. And some of the parallels were fairly like, straightforward, I guess, and others I think I did sort of have to think about like very deeply. Like one of the more obvious, I guess, parallels, that I use in the book is between hybrid fish that are hybrids of two different species, and then thinking about like my own experience as a mixed-race person. Like that’s a very obvious parallel in many ways and was sort of easy to write into. But then there were others where I basically, I made like a chart with two columns, and in one of them I put all the creatures that I found interesting. So like crabs, and siphonophores, and sea slugs, and all these different things. And then in the other column, I put like these are things about my life that I think about a lot, and I want to write about in some way, or I think maybe I have something to say about them. And then I just kind of looked at these two columns, these two very different columns, and was like, oh, what might be in conversation with each other, like what might sort of open up new meaning in one of the other subjects.

And some of them that I tried writing like, turned out so bad. [Tuck laughs] And then I said, that’s not—we’re not putting that in the book. Like, we’re not even finishing writing that. But yeah, I think it was sort of, some came very naturally, and some I definitely kind of engineered, like the crab essay in the book. That was one of the ones where I was like, I definitely want to write about like queer nightlife, and like, what it’s meant to me, and like, you know what it feels like to be like in this dark and thriving space. And then I was like, oh hydrothermal vents, like there’s probably a, you know, a creature that lives on a hydrothermal vent that looks like a little bit queer. And then I just found like a weird-looking one. [Tuck laughs] And then once, like once I sort of made that parallel, then the more I read about this weird, hairy, yeti crab, I like found that one of the species like actually, literally does dance in the chemical plumes of a hydrothermal vent and like waves its little hairy crab claws back and forth very slowly. And I was like, chef’s kiss. Like, I did not anticipate this, and it’s so perfect.

**Tuck:** I love that. But I want to back up to an earlier part of what you were just saying, because you were talking about the octopus—like that was an especially devastating part of the book to me, is when you’re describing this octopus that you just described to the listeners, who incubates her eggs for several years and then slowly starves to death. And there’s something about that imagery that is so heartbreaking to me. And then you can describe you and your mom also struggling with eating disorders, and that’s something that I relate to personally, and because of or despite that, it doesn’t hit in the same like deep, stabbing way as it does thinking about like, octopus who is sad. And I found this happens quite a bit, like the times that I feel like the most devastatingly sad is when I see some sort of animal feeling an animal feeling, maybe not even a real animal feeling. Maybe just a feeling that we have projected onto animals, and that’s what really gets me. And I was curious if you just had any thoughts about what it is about non-human animals that maybe could fuck some of us up in that way, because maybe that is also an experience you have as someone who really cares about creatures, is being able to have really strong feelings about them. And I know that’s not true of everyone, because some people treat animals like shit, but you know, some of us, meanwhile, are looking at like a gif of a worm and being like, aww. [Both laugh]

**Sabrina:** Okay, I’m glad you also find worms cute. And I’m glad the octopus sparked a big feeling. I mean I think I really relate to that like, hearing a, you know, a human story, that is full of like very familiar and recognizable emotion, like whether or not you’ve experienced, I feel like, I think you understand the emotional reaction that provokes. But then when you think about this octopus, like a creature that we know it has like an amazing intelligence that is quite different from our own, but like still similar in some way, like they can open jars, like they can escape from a tank and like crawl into another tank in an aquarium and like eat a fish and then go back to its first tank. Like, they really are remarkable. And to think about a creature with what we might call creativity, or like exuberance, like sitting in the deep sea on like a sea cliff for four and a half years, like not able to have a treat. Like not able to hang out in whatever capacity, you know, an octopus might do that. Like it’s the unknowable nature of the octopus’s experience, and I feel like it is deeply human, or at least I relate to sort of like, I want to know what this octopus is experiencing. Like I want to know what it’s feeling, or yeah, what its experience is like, and we will just truly never know that.

And I feel like there is kind of like grief in that understanding that like, this is just a separate experience, and it’s one that we don’t have access to. And I also respect that like octopuses deserve privacy too. Like I don’t, you know, it’s not like we deserve to be able to embody that octopus in that moment. But I feel like it is, I don’t know, it just is moving to see an animal clearly having a transformative experience in its life, and like we just cannot access it. But you know, the ways in which it provokes our own emotions or reminds us of our own situation, like I feel like it does stoke so many, so many emotions. I mean yeah, I definitely, like I went to an aquarium a couple of years ago, and they had beluga whales, and I was like, overcome with grief just like seeing these enormous creatures in this, like it’s a big tank, but it’s still a tank. And yeah, and these whales are often used as a backdrop for weddings. Like people often get married at this aquarium, and then they’ll have like the whale in the background like smiling, because that’s just what their faces look like, and they’re always like, this whale is so happy for this couple to be married. And it’s like, it’s just—its face just looks like it’s smiling, like the whale isn’t celebrating with you. And yeah, I think that’s also just, I like, I want to know if the whale is happy and I will never, I will never know that. And yeah, there’s just that level of sort of, the gap that will never be closed. I feel like there is a lot of emotion in that.

**Tuck**: Yeah. You specialize in these creature stories, these science stories, and at first I was wondering actually if that allowed you a freedom from the specific hell that is being a trans journalist who’s covering transphobia, although you have done that as well. And then I was thinking, well maybe you’re actually in a different hell because I have to imagine that often when you’re learning about creatures you’re also learning that they’re like endangered or extinct or imperiled in some way. So I was curious about the emotional impact of both of those beats.

**Sabrina:** Yeah, I meant it’s a great question, and I guess I’ll talk about creatures first. I feel so lucky to have the beat that I do. Like there is so much joy and wonder that I get to access through my job, that my friends who cover like, the coronavirus, just don’t have. And they experience a different kind of job trauma that is just unthinkable, and like, really fucking sucks. But with creatures, there is just like, every time I do a story I feel like I get to meet some new individual that I’ve like never otherwise encountered, and like maybe will never encounter in my life. Like maybe it lives in a strange pond in like in the middle of a desert that you can only get to if you drive a jeep for eight hours, and I am like just constantly inspired by just the different ways there are to live on earth. I feel like I learn something new about, yeah, survival in every story that I do, and a lot of the creatures that I do choose to write about like are frankly, silly. [Tuck laughs] Like a silly little frog, or like a silly bird that makes a shitty nest. But for a lot of them, as you said, like there is this sort of other story of like, well you know now that scientists studied this one particular scorpion, and discovered it has like this strange ability, like how is it doing in the wild. And most often the answer is like, not very well or like, we actually don’t really know.

And there is this darker, larger story of like, climate change and human development encroaching on wild spaces, and truly how little wild space there is left for so many creatures that live, you know, all around the word. And I don’t know, I guess I never shy away from trying to put all of these elements into the story together. Like both the humor of like, oh you know this tiny frog can’t land any of its jumps, like it just looks very silly, it only has here toes instead of five, like it’s bright orange, and it’s the size of like, a bumblebee. Like that’s so funny. But also this frog, its habitat is being degraded every day, and like being deforested, and we truly don’t know how many of them there are left. And I feel like part of the responsibility of someone who writes about creatures and writes about the wonder of life and the many ways it takes form on earth is to sort of talk about like, we have affected the lives of basically everything living on earth, like most often for the worse. And so, it’s our responsibility to try to get people to connect with these creatures and feel like, oh, you know, we have some accountability, and why their populations are failing, or why they’re threatened in these various ways. And like I hope to also understand that like all of our survivals on this planet are tied together, and the more that we can understand that we are all part of this interconnected system, I feel like the more hopefully people will try to take climate action, or you know, conserve green spaces around them.

But yeah, it is sad, and it can also feel like such as sad twist of the knife in the end of the story of like, an otherwise delightful frog that you know, well, by the way, they might die out in the next 50 years. But yeah, there’s like no choice to me. I couldn’t not put that in the story. And then I guess to talk about writing about humans, when I first, I guess, started writing about trans communities in my capacity as a journalist, like I felt really out of my depth, because I, yeah, I have this very specific experience of like writing about non-human animals, and the ocean, and the environment. And I wanted to write stories about trans communities, because it felt like if I were to have this enormous platform at the place where I was working, I would feel guilty if I didn’t try to write about stories that I felt like were not being covered well and/or were not being covered at all. But it was a huge learning curve, because you know, being trans doesn’t make you equipped to cover trans issues. And there were so many things that I had to learn, and like things I wanted to be careful of, and of course, many editors and the standards desk, to sort of like negotiate what could go in thee story and what couldn’t. And it was, yeah, it was the hardest thing I have done, and I don’t even know if I did a very good job, but like I’m happy that I tried, and it was absolutely depressing. That’s not like, a very interesting answer.

**Tuck:** I was curious if, going in, you had any specific goals in terms of either form or content, like this is a point I don’t see people making, this is an angle I haven’t seen, like this is the way I want to source. And I’m asking this because I have been consulting on a lot of pieces that cis people are writing about this kind of stuff, and I would say, specifically cis straight people mostly are writing, and they don’t think about that. They don’t think about like, here’s how my story will be different than other stories that exist. So I was just curious if there was anything that you particularly had in mind.

**Sabrina:** It’s a good question, and I absolutely did. I mean, I think I like knew as someone who had never covered healthcare before that like, I didn’t feel equipped to write about, I don’t know, the bureaucracy of healthcare, like to do a really hard-hitting investigative story, but I was like, I have written features about people. And so my goal is to write a story or a series of stories where like trans youth are the center of the story, and like the experts in this story, and like the main subjects of the story, because coverage that I had read at the *Times* and also like a bunch of other big publications, like it always felt like it’s a lot of generally cis adults and doctors talking about trans children, but like they were never present in the story. And like, there are obvious reasons to not include identifying information about children who are very, very young, but specifically around like trans adolescents, I was like, you know, they are interviewed for other pieces all the time. They are thinking about these decisions, like it’s their lives, and I wanted to put them at the heart of the story. I guess when I tried to actually do that [Both laugh], I had a lot of back and forth. I was constantly getting in trouble with the standards desk.

**Tuck:** Uh huh.

**Sabrina:** And I remember specifically like when I turned in my first story, I got this long note back that was like, this story seems to think that like trans teenagers are experts. [Tuck gasps] And I was like, they ARE! They *are* experts. And they were like, we need to get some more real experts in here. And I was like, this is about their experience, this is about their life, they are the experts of their own story. And so then it was just like this constant back and forth of like renegotiating okay, well I’ll put in another doctor, but like, I’m not taking away this part of the narrative, and like I’m not changing the center of the story. But it was exhausting, and there were so many points where I was like, I feel like I had to make it clear in my head of like, there needs to be a point where I walk away and I pull the story, because I don’t want to publish something that like, I think could cause harm. But yeah, there were so many things where I was like, I didn’t even know that that would be something that you would be upset about. But like, it was, and like how do I even begin to explain that like what you’re saying is absurd, like that a teenager isn’t an expert about their own life and their own happiness. And then after I wrote two stories, I said no more, I’m not equipped. I don’t think this is productive at this point.

**Tuck:** Right. You mentioned to me that you started T while reporting these stories about trans youth accessing healthcare, and I was just wondering what that was like, going through a similar thing as a thing you were reporting on. Obviously, it made you an incredibly biased journalist, and it was irresponsible. [Both laugh] No, but I’m curious.

**Sabrina:** Yeah, I was in the pocket of Big Bias. [Tuck laughs] I mean, I guess as I was reporting these stories specifically about like trans adolescents being unable to access both gender-affirming healthcare and healthcare in general, and also teenagers and children in the state of Arkansas sort of fighting against a law that would ban their access to hormone therapy and other gender-affirming healthcare, I was like, okay, I’m just going to try a little bit of testosterone, like maybe that will make me feel better. And I started calling like Planned Parenthood, because I don’t know, I guess I was like, that I think is the place where you go do it. And they were like, we don’t have any appointments until the new year. And I was like, what if I just went somewhere outside of Planned Parenthood. And then I went to Apicha, which is a community health center in Chinatown, and like I was able to get an appointment and then was prescribed testosterone, but then I had to get prior approval from my insurance, and then I had to call like the union rep for like the *Times* insurance, like try to get them to approve it, and they were all so confused. And I had to spend so much time on the phone with people being like, Miss Imbler, you are here for test—test-test-erone, and it’s like oh my god, just like the most painful bureaucratic calls. And like I was just being punted from like insurance to like Apicha—it was just so, so stressful. The whole process probably took me like, I don’t know, like five months.

And it was just so surreal to have this personal experience of like, I am an adult living in New York City, like a place where it’s quite easy to get, you know, appointments, and like use an informed consent model. Like I just have to say this is what I want, and then I get it prescribed. And for all my editors and the standards desk to be like, you know, kids are accessing hormone therapy far too easily and far too quickly. I was like, it felt like fucking running a marathon for me. It felt like it was the most difficult medicine I’ve ever had to access. And it just was also something that I was like, I’m not going to share this very personal experience with my editors, but it just felt like another example of like, we’re both looking at this and I think seeing, understanding the situation very, very differently. But it was, I don’t know, it was also like very poignant and like special to have met the teens that I did meet for these stories, and to hear about their own experiences. And I think also, a lot of the parents very rightfully were very like, suspicious of me as a journalist at the *New York Times* coming to talk to their family. And I was very lucky to be frank about like my own identity and my own experience, my aims for the story, and to be able to communicate that. But yeah, it was a real trip, is yeah, I think my final thought.

**Tuck:** Yeah. Well, speaking of transsexuality, clearly, you wrote to me, creatures don’t have genders, but a lot of different sexes and bodies and ways of having sex. And I failed to ask you this when we were talking more about creatures, but you’ve got to talk to us about creature sex I guess.

**Sabrina:** Yeah, I mean, that’s one of my favorite things about creatures. I feel like, I don’t know, like lots of people, I feel like you go on Instagram, or like, whatever, and you’re like, oh, like that’s the gender I want, or like, that’s how I want to be. And I feel like I just go to like, the ocean, like that’s pretty cool, what if I did that? I mean, there’s so many different kinds of bodies and sexes and ways to have sex in the ocean that I frankly, find like inspiring, and I really love. Like there are obviously, I don’t know, I feel like I often see people like, they’ll look at a fish that changes sex and be like, this fish is trans. Okay, well, like, different, but also like still inspirational. [Tuck laughs] And I guess like some of the more famous examples of like transsexualism in the ocean are clownfish, which are sequential hermaphrodites. So like they live in these groups where there will be two large fish and like a bunch of smaller fish, and the large ones are the only ones who are sexually mature. And there will be like a male and a female large clownfish, and all the smaller fish are all male. But if the large female dies, or like leaves for another anemone, the next largest male becomes really, really big, and becomes the new sexually mature male, and like her other male mate will become a female. And a lot of fish, like, change their sex, I think, according to the populations that they live in, like sort of to fill voids of like, oh there’s no female, I will become the female, or like there’s no male, I will become the male.

There are other fish called humphead wrasses, which are like really, really big fish, with really fleshy lips, like a big hump on their forehead, and they can be born male or female. And those born male will always be a male, but when females become mature at around like five to seven years old, they can transform into what is scientifically called a supermale [laughs], which is just like a really big male, all these like cool squiggles on their face, and like a really big hump on their head, and they do this if like the dominant male, like the biggest male in their community, like, you know, dies or disappears or whatever, to sort of fill that void. And I don’t know, I think it’s very, like, there are just the obvious parallels, like these fish are changing sex, but I think it’s really beautiful to think about like sort of that fluidity of like, my body is what my community needs it to be. And like if there is a gap, like I will fill it, and there’s just so much of that fluidity in the ocean that I find like frankly, very inspiring. And also when you change sex as a fish, you oftentimes change colors, which I think, like, I wish there was like a, I don’t know, maybe like bleaching your hair or something, but there’s just so many other bodily ways of transformation that the animal kingdom has access to, and I’m frankly jealous.

**Tuck:** Okay, this is such an out-of-left-field question, although maybe not, maybe it’s right in your wheelhouse, but I was watching a documentary with my roommate one time, and I came in right at the very end, and the very end was they had strapped this camera to a shark, because they had never seen where the sharks fucked. [Sabrina laughs] And then the very end of the documentary was just the shark going so deep and dark that you couldn’t see anything on the camera anymore, and then them hearing weird thumping, and then being like, we figured out where the shark fucks, and it’s in the Bermuda Triangle, hell yeah! And then recently, there was an article about how they figured out that eels also fuck in the Bermuda Triangle. So speaking about creatures having sex in ways, why is everyone fucking in the Bermuda Triangle, and would you, if you could?

**Sabrina:** Wow. [Tuck laughs] This is a question I’ve never been asked before.

**Tuck:** I was like, here we go. Didn’t prepare for this one.

**Sabrina:** Yeah, I mean it is funny how much of ocean sciences is just sticking cameras on things to see how they fuck and where they fuck and who they fuck, and of course, you kind of have to be like big enough to enough to get a camera on you, so sharks are pretty easy. But yeah, the eel sex mystery has been a long-standing one. And the eel community rejoiced upon learning like, okay, yes, they fuck in the Sargasso Sea, you’re like yeah. But yes, I think if I were given the opportunity to fuck in the Bermuda Triangle, like it would be so fucking weird if I didn’t. It would be so embarrassing. [Both laugh]

**Tuck:** That’s all. Normal conversation. So, you currently work at Defector, which was founded as a sports blog, but now you’re there writing bangers like “The Ocean’s Hottest Club is a Manta Ray,” “New Assfish Photo Just Dropped,” “Stingrays Can Do Math, But Why Would They?”, and “Every Animal On The Wikipedia Page For ‘Apparent Death’ Ranked By How Dead They Appear.” I talk about Defector all the time in the Gender Reveal newsletter, but I don’t know if I actually have talked about it on the show. So I was wondering if you could explain a little bit about like what Defector’s model is that makes it different, and also how you managed to carve out this beat that is so distinct from the rest of what they’re publishing on the site.

**Sabrina:** Yeah, I love the Defector shoutouts in the newsletter. So, Defector was founded when a lot of the people who now work for another blog called Deadspin, and this horrible man, Jim Spanfeller, sort of took over and tried to institute like policies where the writers could only write about sports and not like culture or politics, or just like the other things that are deeply intertwined with sports, but also just like the human existence, and then fired one of the writers. Everyone basically mass quit and then started their own company called Defector, which is very aptly named. And we basically work on a subscription model, so all of our revenue comes from people who pay to read our site, our subscribers. They are like different tiers where you can pay more if you want to comment. The people who comment on Defector stories are truly a strange corner of the internet, cause I feel like at every other place that I’ve worked, reading the comments of my story, like wishing to throw myself into an eel pit, but like I don’t know, the eels are also poisonous, because I realized I would actually willingly be thrown into an eel pit. [Tuck laughs] But everyone who comments on Defector stories is very nice or like wants to sort of share like their own encounter with the bug that I write about, or like their opinion of what math a sting ray should do.

It’s very charming, and it’s also like one of—I mean it’s the best job I’ve ever had, and it’s the only place where I have truly felt like secure as a trans journalist, and like, I don’t know, as a journalist of color, like as a journalist of literally any identity, because there is just this understanding of like, traditional norms of objectivity are stupid, and you should just be yourself, and like there are certain things that we consider not a subject of debate. These are just facts, like trans people deserve to have hormones and be happy, and it’s really refreshing to work here, and it can feel weird to write about creatures for a sports site. Like if you look at the site, it’s like a lot of hockey, NFL, tennis, F1, and then like a little eel in the corner. But yeah, I feel very lucky that they have allowed me to write about exactly what I want to write about, and I feel like it has been a challenge to write stories about creatures to people who, you know, maybe wouldn’t otherwise have wanted to read about a weird bug or a goldfish or something, and I feel like I’m trying to yeah, like reach a new audience that I’ve never reached before. But yeah, it’s just, I don’t know, t’s a company that is deeply invested in the sustainability of the business, and also like the sustainability of all of our health and our lives and our welfare as workers, and we don’t have to fear like, oh you know, one moment if someone horrible buys us, like all of this could go away and be ruined. It’s kind of like, no, we make the decisions, and we take care of ourselves, and I wish that there could be more Defectors for everything.

**Tuck:** Yeah, that’s true all the time in newsrooms around the country, but it is—we are also recording this like the day of the huge layoffs at Twitter, so yeah, it’s very like, we can’t just have one man come in and destroy everything. Well, speaking of the comment corners of the internet, you’ve written so often about Neopets. [Sabrina laughs] Are you still on Neopets? And what’s going on over there?

**Sabrina:** Thank you for this question.

**Tuck:** Yeah, I also considered, “Are Neopets creatures?” so if you’d like to answer that as well.

**Sabrina:** They definitely are creatures.

**Tuck:** Great.

**Sabrina:** I am a Neopets sicko. [Tuck laughs] And I, I really like, I have had a years-long relationship with Neopets. I first started playing it in middle school, or no, in elementary school, and I know that I started playing Neopets before I was 13, right, because you had to be over 13 to play Neopets, but I was younger, so I made up my birthday to make my account. And when I later tried to like log into that account, but forgot my password and my birthday, I like went on some online forum to get a birthday hack from some person who was like giving up free birthday hack. And then he hacked into my account for free and then told me my birthday that I put—

**Tuck:** That’s so funny.

**Sabrina:** Which was January 1, 1903 [Tuck laughs], which I thought was like so funny.

**Tuck:** That’s incredible.

**Sabrina:** But yeah, Neopets are definitely creatures.

**Tuck:** Wait, what’s going on there now?

**Sabrina:** I had—I went back on Neopets over the pandemic several times, but it’s different, like you can put hair on your Neopets, and you can give them clothes—

**Tuck:** Why? No.

**Sabrina:** Which I feel, yeah, I feel weird about, I don’t support it. And I feel like Flash didn’t work on my computer anymore, so I couldn’t play like Turmac Roll, I couldn’t play Whack-A-Kass. So yeah, I don’t know, it felt like a sad, you know, like when you go back to your childhood mall or whatever, and you walk around and like Claire’s is like, shuttered or something. The Hollister is dark. And then recently like a couple of weeks ago, I tried to log back in, but I think there was like a data breach, which I learned about because whenever there’s a data breach at Neopets, which happens so frequently, they’ll do like in the Neopets font, like on the yellow starry background, like your data might have been hacked, and there’s like a sad JubJub. And I couldn’t log into my account. So I think maybe, maybe it’s finally over, which is sad.

**Tuck:** Aww. Uh, I have questions, but what I need to ask you is, is there anything else that we haven’t talked about yet that you want to make sure we talk about?

**Sabrina:** I don’t know. I think I have a general recommendation of like, there are so many human ways to have genders, and so many of those are so wonderful. But I really encourage like looking into the animal kingdom, the plant kingdom, into fungi, and just sort of seeing like the different bodies that creatures have, or that life takes, and the different ways there are to live and like, to really think like, oh does this spark any sort of yearning in me? Like does this spark any recognition? Like I feel like I’m constantly, yeah, looking for role models in non-human form, and I feel like a lot of the things that I’ve learned about creatures have helped me consider new ways I can be in my own body, or I can think of myself as like intertwined with other people. So yeah, I don’t know, watch a nature documentary and see what sparks.

**Tuck:** Sabrina, there’s already so many trans people named Moss, and you’re just going to make more of them! No, this is great, I’m glad you said this. I actually pulled a relevant section of your book to ask you a similar thing to what you answered without me asking. So I just wanted to read it for people, so they could hear it, and then we’ll wrap up. But you wrote, “For a long time, mostly in college, I thought I could resolve this irritation by categorizing myself, meaning obsessing over the particulars of my identity—what I could call myself, what spaces I could occupy, when I could blame other people, and when I had to blame myself.” And then a few lines later you go on to say, “Maybe it’s a side effect of coming out twice in adulthood, but I do not want to feel resolved around myself.” And I know the first part was about race, specifically, which also resonates with me, but I mean obviously we can also see the gender and sexuality coming in there. So I just wanted to say like yes, that is also present in the book. So if people are hearing you talk about that and they’re like, I relate to this, I’m interested in this, like, congratulations, a book! You could read it, and you’ll also learn about ten sea creatures.

**Sabrina:** Yeah, I mean, I do feel like being mixed race very much prepared me to sort of constantly be like, it’s okay if there’s no word, because I don’t know, yeah, growing up I was like I have to figure out like the right way to label me, because there isn’t, you know, a specific word that feels good, and then I found a word that felt like very good to use. Like I felt a lot of affinity with the word Hapa for a while, and then I learned that that was actually not my word to use, and like, I, I’m not native Hawaiian, and so it's not accurate, and it’s not mine. And I think, yeah, in college, I was like, I have to find, I have to specifically name my sexuality, have to figure out like if—yeah, like, what I am and what I can call myself. And that just feels so silly now. And I feel very excited to continue growing and to like learn from the youth, who I feel are doing like, amazing and bizarre things that like I am not familiar with. And I imagine that, you know, genderqueer, like maybe when I’m, like ten years down, there will be another word that I’m like, oh, that feels like better than what I’m using, like I’ll switch to that.

**Tuck:** For sure.

**Sabrina:** Yeah, and like that all of these words are just a product of time and the space that we’re in, and yeah, ultimately not the most exciting thing to think about. And then when I was writing the book, I think something that I also found really liberating, there’s a chapter about cuttlefish, and cuttlefish do this cool thing where if they are like jetting around changing colors, doing like weird little cuttlefish things, if they feel threatened they can basically spurt in ink, like a silhouette of themselves, which is called a pseudomorph. So, it just basically is the shape of whatever the cuttlefish looks like in that moment, but it’s just ink, so the cuttlefish can sort of like jet away. And I think that part of the reason that I was like scared to write about gender or myself, like in this book, is because I felt like I had to have everything resolved, where I was like, it’s gonna be so embarrassing if I write about being non-binary, and then like a year later, like what if I’m not that, that’s going to be so embarrassing. And it’s like, no, like we’re all on this journey, and it was so nice to sort of think about like, you know, all of these essays are pseudomorphs, like they’re how I felt in the moment that I wrote them, and they were true for the version of Sabrina that existed like in that moment in time, and it’ll probably look different. Like if I were to see a bear, I would spurt out a different kind of pseudomorph today, and like all of these are important and nice little records of the ways that I have found home in my body and in community.

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

**Sabrina:** I hope that like, I don’t know, you look at biodiversity, and you see all these different like, creatures that have taken millions of years to evolve and be perfectly adapted to their environment, and there’s just like, a staggering number of different ways to like live and be. And I hope that there is just sort of like a similar path where people are continuing to find the very specific things that work for them and make them feel good and also feel flexible to change and to evolve that relationship over the course of their lives. So I guess in simpler words, I would say like I hope it’s good vibes for everyone. [Tuck laughs] Good vibes and free will!

[Gender Reveal theme music plays]

**Tuck:** That’s going to do it for this week’s show. If you had a good time, or learned something, please share this episode with friends or coworkers, or some creature appreciators in your life. If you want to hear more from this conversation, head to patreon.com/gender, and sign up for our bonus podcast, Gender Conceal, where we will be releasing an exclusive extra 15 or so minutes of this conversation. This includes topics like Neopets scams, Tamora Pierce, matching T voices, more eyebrow gender, and like so, so, so, so much about our cats’ attachment styles. You can find Sabrina on Twitter @aznfusion, that’s a-z-n fusion. You can find their work at Defector.com, and at simbler.github.io. *How Far the Light Reaches* is out tomorrow, December 6th, wherever you get books. Sabrina is also about to start a little book tour with events in New York, San Francisco, and online, and I will put a link to more info about that in the show notes.

Of course, you can find us on Twitter and Instagram and at genderpodcast.com, where you can find transcripts of every episode and all sorts of other useful stuff. Today’s episode was produced and edited by Ozzy Linas Goodman and by me, Tuck Woodstock. Our logo is by Ira M. Leigh. Our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder. Additional music this week by Blue Dot Sessions. We’ll be back in two weeks— that’s a fortnight, baby—with more feelings about gender.