

## Episode 5: The Long and Winding Road of Queer Lit

**TJ:** Look, it's, it's going to be like this. The idea of romance is a wonderful one. It's lovely, it's beautiful, but it doesn't just happen to people in their twenties it just doesn't happen to people in their thirties it's, it's all ages.

It can happen to anyone at any time. And I think it's important that we show that. As I am getting older, I am less and less inclined to want to write about younger people, which is ironic given the fact that I'm making my YA debut in less than three months from when we're recording this. But I, I, I like getting older.

**\*THEME MUSIC\***

**Kirt:** Welcome to the Klunatics Podcast. I'm Kirt Graves. Today, we're going back in time to examine what queer literature looked like in its infancy, how that affected the people who read it, and how it's evolved to better represent queer people and educate allies. And to do that, we'll be talking to a few of the Klunatics' most distinguished members.

Anyone who has been reading queer literature for more than a few years knows that many of the earliest gay stories depicted harsh consequences or tragic endings for its characters daring to express their love. Like the only way you could write a gay love story was if the gays also got what was coming to them by the end of the book. And TJ is no exception. Here he is describing the first gay book he remembers reading.

**Kirt:** Do you remember the first queer queer book that you read.

**TJ:** Yes, The Front Runner by Patricia Nell Warren and when I was 16 years old, and it is, I still think today, to this day, it's a landmark in queer literature, and I think it should be read by everyone, but at the same time, it is a book, you know, it'd be spoiling a 30, 40 year old book, but it is a book in which one of the main gay characters is killed. At the very end, he is an Olympic runner named Billy, and he is in the Olympics and he's essentially assassinated because somebody who is extraordinarily homophobic does not think he should be in the Olympics and kills him.

**Kirt:** TJ isn't the only one who remembers reading this book.

**Brett W.:** Well, hello, I am Brett Waters. I'm from Colorado Springs, Colorado.

**Brett W.:** The first book I ever read was Patricia Nell Warren's, uh, Front Runner, and I was in high school and I just thought how scandalous this was and delightful that I can read something that was my lifestyle. I didn't have to interject myself into somebody else's story, which I was so used to between music and

television and books, but everything back then was always, it's like it always had to have a tragic ending.

**TJ:** I remember being 16 years old and reading the book up to that point and thinking, wow, these are characters that are just like me. They're not, they're not, um, they don't play out as stereotypes, but then you get to the ending and it's the most devastating, I think it's probably the most devastated I've ever been reading a book aside from *Where the Red Fern Grows*, and that's just because I love dogs too much. That book affected me probably more than any other book I've read just because it, I thought it was so well done, so well written.

**Kirt:** **Jay recalls a similar sense of tragedy in early books.**

**Jay:** My name is Jay and I'm from, uh, New York city area.

**Jay:** I definitely think that queer literature has evolved...I would say before the 80s, so many of the gay and homosexual characters were always, uh, portrayed as tragic, or they had to have a tragic ending, um, had to die. They had to be abandoned. And you know, there's always this kind of terrible things that happen to them, or, which was almost a subconscious, like, self whipping.

**Kirt:** **John Brett remembers the first queer book he read and, unfortunately, it follows this trend.**

**John B.:** So I'm John Brett. I'm from Lincolnshire in the United Kingdom.

**John B.:** So I first read a book called, *I Want What I Want*, uh, by an author called Geoff Brown, and it was published in the 60s, and it's about a trans person. Um, a guy called, um, Roy, who wants to become Wendy.

Uh, and it's set in the North of England, not too far from where I live. Um, it's pretty harrowing, pretty gritty. I started reading it again over the last few days. Um, and so I found this book as a paperback in my partner's collection when we first got together. So we've been together 29 years now, and it would be about 28 years ago when I read it.

Uh, and I think the hard copy is now up in our attic somewhere. And, um, that was the first book I ever read, and it was an interesting book, uh, but it was pretty gritty. And it, uh, if I remember it had quite a sad ending.

**Kirt:** **While it was immediately clear to me that Patricia Nell Warren was not a gay man writing about gay men, I was curious if the book that John references was written by a trans woman.**

**John B.:** Wow. This is a, this is quite an interesting thing to ask because, um, I've done a little research over the last few days to find out about this guy. He passed away in 2008. Um, but I read a blog by a trans woman from Canada who tracked him down because she had a first edition copy that she wanted signing.

And as far as we can tell, as far as she was able to find out, he was a cisgendered heterosexual, married. But the book is so detailed that there is question, um, that maybe he might've wanted to be trans and just couldn't be. It's very detailed. Uh, it goes into details about, um, tucking everything up and strapping everything up so that he could wear panty, the, the main character wear panties, um, talks about, uh, you know, the fact that the main character knew that there were people in the world who had, uh, surgery to change gender or to change sex as the word term was then. So, yeah. It's an interesting thing how much the author knew, whether it was research, uh, just to write the book or whether it was actually, you know, uh, a deep longing that never got fulfilled.

**Kirt:** The concept of writing what you know, from a place of personal experience, is part of a movement called Own Voices. We'll be diving into that in more detail in a future episode.

**In the meantime, there was one book series that came up again and again in discussing early queer literature.**

**Janice:** And, um, the very first book I read was Tales of the City, Armistead Maupin, and I adored it.

**Kirt:** I was talking yesterday with another Klunatic who brought up Tales of the City by Armistead Maupin.

**Linda:** Oh, sure, which I did read.

**Brett W.:** I go back to the original Tales of the City, the miniseries, and was addicted to that.

**John B.:** I've read all of the Tales of the City series because you can't not

**Kirt:** The first book from that series, also titled Tales of the City, was published in 1978. The first two voices you heard there are Janice and Linda, and I'm going to let Janice describe what the general attitude was toward the LGBTQ community in her town at the time those books were released.

**Janice:** Hi everyone. I'm Janice Birnie and I'm in a blanket fort right now in Melbourne, Australia.

**Janice:** Okay. So way back in 1978, understanding my age, um, I grew up in a small town of 11,000 people. Tiny library, very censored, had never seen queer, any kind of queer literature.

Um, and I actually, nobody was out in a town that size, you just couldn't be, it would have been horrendous for them. So I came to Mel, ran away from that place, um, came to Melbourne and went to uni, and met people of all different sexualities. And even though in the 70s they weren't really out, a lot of people weren't out.

It was still a very difficult time. People were being arrested. There was some pretty horrific things happening, um, between the police and the community. So. To be out was a real act of courage

**Kirt:** Both Janice and Linda were allies from an early age, befriending those courageous queer people in real life, not just on the page. Linda tells us more about her background.

**Linda:** My name is Linda Pierce. I'm from Spokane, Washington.

**Linda:** I've always had queer people in my life. My best friend in college, uh, was gay and I was like the f- one of the first people he came out to when we were freshmen in college. And so, um, that was probably the first person I know.

My best friend in high school is, uh, is gay. She came out and met, met her wife, gosh, when we were seniors in college. And then actually the library world has a number of, uh, of people that are gay at it. That seems to be a safe place and a good place for that. So many, many of my colleagues, have been gay, so, uh, no, that, that experience has been part of my life for a long, long time.

**Kirt:** Janice goes on to describe why Armistead Maupin's books were important to her.

**Janice:** Um, then of course AIDS happened. Um, and, his books reflected that and in my life in Melbourne, um, it was happening around me too. So I was very much, that's when I started to really, I would say, become an ally. Uh, one of our very good friends from uni, um, was president of the Victorian AIDS council.

Um, and they were pushing, pushing for funding, and it was just early eighties, horrible time. Um, but they came, the community came together. The, um, you know, the safest group, everybody kept saying the safest group was the lesbians, but, of course, they were wonderful, and they joined forces with the gay community, and I think, in Australia anyway, I think that's when we really began to see, um, them coming to the fore to saying, we want our rights, we're here, we're queer, get used to it. That was the thing. And from then on, um, it was just, yeah, it led to what we've got now, which is, you know, marriage equality and so on. The real journey with the fighting was in the 70s, I was part of that, I saw it, and that's when I became an ally.

**John B.:** You know, we have a lot of history and we have a lot to thank the older members of our community. For. And, you know, I'm starting to feel a little bit that way myself cause I'm about to turn 50 in a few weeks. Uh, and realizing that I am part of that, that kind of age group

now that is seen as older. Um, and then I've got my partner who's 81 and who grew up in the forties and fifties, and saw a very different, uh, side to queer life than I did.

And that's, um, I think sometimes, and I don't want to sound like I'm bashing on the younger generation, but I think some of our younger generations have kind of lost the connection a little bit to the history and what came before and the voices, um, that spoke out so that they could have the life that they have now.

**Kirt:** We're fortunate to now live in a time where queer literature doesn't have to be defined by the bad things that happen to the protagonists. But a few of the tropes from earlier generations persist. Here's Jay again.

**Jay:** The stereotypes are they still there, I guess they are in some ways. There's still some tropes that, that, that kind of keep going on. Uh, the, the effeminate guys and, um, you know, the, they like to go shopping and some of that kind of kind of, um, stereotypical, uh, characterizations.

**Kirt:** And if it's not a stereotype rearing its head, it may just be inauthentic writing.

**TJ:** I understand that romance is a fantasy. I, I get that. I do, but not everybody needs to have an eight pack abs and a 12 inch dick and growl wherever they go and have their name be like Blaze or Steel or something like that.

**Brett W.:** I'm hoping that I'm not going to say something bizarre, one of the things that really irritates me is when certain writers will use words that I'm like, wow, I don't ever remember telling another man that I like their perineum

**Kirt:** But queer literature has come a long way. Particularly male/male romance.

**Jay:** And that's part of the reason that I really liked to read, are starting to read and really enjoy, m/m literature because I felt like it was about me or I could be in that situation. And, um. You know, for so long I've been reading so much that I wasn't, it was just reading it and then being an observer of the story instead, where I couldn't quite put myself in it without, you know, changing pronouns and doing that.

Uh, that's one of the appeals, especially I liked, some m/m romance, um, there's been some books that I've read that have made me think differently about how I see myself, how I see other gay men and other people. Um, so it has been, it has been good and a learning experience for myself.

**Kirt:** And we can't talk about romance without talking about sex. It's woven into the DNA of romance. Kris helped me make a connection between the work I do now and the books I remember seeing on grocery store shelves when I was a kid.

**Kris:** Hi, I'm Kris Gray.

**Kirt:** And where are you from, Kris?

**Kris:** Uh, Rockford, Illinois. Raised here. Have lived here all my life.

**Kris:** ...before I always kind of read, uh, strictly male/female romance. Um, whether it was kind of contemporary or, uh, historical. You know, the, uh, bodice ripping, you know.

**Kirt:** Well, the only reason we don't call these bodice ripping is cause men don't wear bodices. Otherwise, I'm sure they'd be getting ripped off.

And I shouldn't say they don't. Cause I'm sure there's books out there where they do.

**Kris:** Yeah.

**Kirt:** And all that gender-neutral-undergarment-ripping content? It, too, can be problematic. (FYI, John mentions a specific author's name in this next bit that I'm going to bleep out because it's really not important to the context of our conversation.)

**John B.:** I also discovered the work of another author, [bleeped out], but most of her work was sex, sex, sex, sex, sex, which was fine, but it was literally every scene was sex, sex, sex.

Um, and, uh, I kind of got bored with that.

**John B.:** [00:11:59] Those things have their place. Those genres have their place. Um.

**Kirt:** [00:12:07] Oh, I think it's incredibly important cause in, in some ways it's almost easier for, you know, het cis people to accept the gay man as, as caretaker, as father, as you know, as business person, as lover, as partner.

But like the second they get to the sex part, then it's icky again. You know? So I, I, you know, when. When we talk about, uh, you know, other writers really focusing a lot on the sex, like I don't say that disparagingly at all because I think

getting people used to the sex part is really the last great hurdle that, like, you gotta get over the sex part if you, and also stop thinking about what it's like when we all have sex.

So, and I don't mean gay men. I mean. Everybody, let's all stop worrying about what it's like when we have sex or what the mechanics are, but like, get past that hurdle. Um, so yeah, I mean, I think the, the romance that leans more towards erotica is also very important in its own way.

**John B.:** I got tired at one point of reading book after book, that, that was filled with it.

But you're right. Getting used to the idea of sexuality and, um, two men, two women, whatever. Being sexual is something that the rest of the world needs to kind of just deal with.

**Kirt:** So how has queer literature evolved? TJ shares some of his thoughts on his own evolution.

**TJ:** Fiction still has power. Romance is the biggest, the biggest moneymaker in fiction. Romance is. People don't like to admit that. You know, you have the literati that they will raise their nose at whatever, but romance makes more money than any other genre and for a reason, because people like the escapism. People like the fantasy.

But I, I've, I've always wrestled with the idea of what I am contributing to, to that particular genre as a whole. The umbrella term of romance, because I, I'm guilty. I will say that I'm guilty of some of the same sins that I'm trying to speak out against. I mean, of course, you know, you, you, when you're writing romance, you do tend to have imperfect people.

Yes. But they all are handsome and, and, and beautiful people. And they always have the right thing to say. And that's, that's something that I'm, I'm guilty of as well, but I, I'm trying to. I'm trying, as I move forward and as I get older, step away from that, I want, I want more realistic people. I've, I've always said that I like, I want to write how I think people talk, but I also need to, I also need to start taking in consideration that.

I also need to write how everybody looks and acts and things like that. Not everybody is a white, straight guy who suddenly has, Oh, I have, I have these gay for you feelings now that that I've never ever even considered before, and now we're all going to just go have sex for the first time, and I'm going to take it like a champ because that's how gay sex works.

**Kirt:** TJ has already embraced all kinds of characters, those who break the very molds he's talking about here.

**Janice:** So as an, as an adult reading TJ's books. I just thought, well, after reading the first and then the second, and of course, even just even at the beginning in Bear, Otter, and the Kid, there was diverse ages and, and types.

Um, but each book I read, I thought, this is fantastic. We, I'm so sick of fetishising gay men, I see it in, in some author groups. And that's, you know, I try not to judge and that's their business, but I want to read about normal people, real people, and real people come in all shapes and sizes and have all different personalities.

**Brett W.:** And that was something that. Why I adore TJ Klune's books. I, I'm, my whole life has been interjecting myself into scenarios to feel normal and that with

TJ's books, there are so many, I mean, come on Linus, we've got a overweight man with a spare tire and. This tall, skinny, older man too.

I am. I really get so tired of this. Everything gets geared towards these young people and every character sees young hotties and, and yes, it's great and wonderful thing. But even as my life has evolved through the years, especially as a gay man. Not being able to come out. And when I did finally come out, it was because I just didn't care anymore what people thought.

And it's like, get over yourself. But TJ has brought this world. And taken the absolute gorgeous hunks and created these people like Paul Auster and Vince. Nana and, "Oh, please, Johnny Depp,"

And Joe and Ox and oh my God. I mean, I w I just feel like. It's sunshine every time. It is literally a breath of fresh air to open one of his books and read, and I have never in my life read a book twice. I have read his books two, three times and still get something new out of it.

**John B.:** I love the fact that he includes characters from across the spectrum and also across age ranges. It's a, yeah, it's, again, it's, I think it's something that's kind of unique to TJ.

**John B.:** You know, Olive Juice is one of those where the older, more mature characters, I think they're in their late forties, if I'm right, maybe, um, those characters. But also my favorite is John and Jackie.

That, that's the story that broke my heart. But also in that short story, TJ painted a whole life, uh, of a couple sharing their life together and coming to the end of their life. And it was such a wonderful, uh, way that he did that. And. I haven't, I don't read a, uh, across a great deal of authors, um, in queer literature, but you don't seem to find very many that, um, are working with, uh, writing older characters.

**Kris:** ...just because they're old doesn't mean they're not interesting, you know.

**Kirt:** **When it comes to TJ and writing older characters, Linda noticed a trend that I wanted to bring up with TJ when I spoke to him.**

**Linda:** And I think what's interesting to me is that some of the older male characters resonate more with me because I think that they are more, in a way, nurturing than some of the older female characters, some of the older female characters, like you talk about Nana and We Three Queens and those types of things.

**Linda:** The female characters are wonderful and they're well written, but they're they almost seem to be there for almost, I don't want to take this too far, for more comic relief than for emotional support.

**Michael Lesley reading from *Until You: You are, Nana gasped. Oh, I didn't know that. Huh? Psych. You guys thought I had dementia. Classic.***

**Linda:** And so I don't know if that's just me reflecting it or that's intentional on his part, or just how the characters are developed and how they interrelate.

**Kirt:** Uh, one of the things that, uh, one of the interview subjects I talked to said, um, when we were talking about the, the older characters is she noted that she saw a trend, uh, that the older female characters were a bit more comic, where then the older male characters were a bit more involved.

**TJ:** Okay.

**Kirt:** Which, one I wonder, like, have you thought about that?

Was that intentional? Do you think there's a truth to that? And two, if, if there's truth to that, you know, was there some intention in almost flipping the script that you would, you know, you think of older female characters as like the mother or the crone? Um. And now it seems like almost the men are taking on the role of like the more compassionate, more involved.

**TJ:** Well, it, it, it was intentional to an extent. I, I knew that when, when I write older characters, older female characters, I, I want to avoid having to them always have to be the role of the matronly Saint. I don't, I, I get that that has a place in it and that is, that is, you know, there are some great characters that are like that, but that's not what I wanted here.

I wanted them to like *We Three Queens*, Nana, Mrs Paquin, I want them to have their moments of comedy to show that that not everything has to be all serious and dour all the time, especially when it comes to women that they can, they can kick back and they can have fun. They can do whatever. They can say whatever the hell they want, just the same as the rest of us.

But on the flip side of that, I, I will admit that the idea of older male characters getting more involved is probably stems from the fact that I myself am a man, and that is just how I see it. And that's how I would write it. And it probably stems from the fact that I most likely have unresolved daddy issues myself.

**Kirt:** **One of the things that I took away from my conversations with Janice, Kris, Linda, Jay, Brett and John, was that queer literature is no longer a place in which the worst versions of gay stereotypes are played out or where queer characters pay a price for just living authentically. No one is getting murdered for being a gay athlete. No one is being taught a lesson by a bigoted straight dude with a gun. Instead, the lessons are being**

**learned by readers. Queer books are a place, even for queer people and their allies, to learn more about the queer community.**

**John B.:** Okay. So I'm going to place the first book I read, which is, I Want What I Want at the beginning of the spectrum and I'm going to place at the end of the spectrum Why We Fight. Two books about, um, trans or non binary characters, entirely different in how they are written and how they feel, um, and, uh, what they represent.

Uh, and the, so in the first book we've got, um. A very harsh story about, uh, the main character wanting to be a woman. And, um, being in a situation where he's sent to a psychiatric hospital and then he comes out of the psychiatric hospital and he continues to dress up in private, gets found out by his father, gets beaten. It's really, you know, harrowing.

Then you've got Why We Fight, which puts forward the struggles, but also is celebratory. It's, it's telling a story and telling how difficult things are still and how much more there is still to go. Uh, but they're, in that book there are a whole range of characters, um, from the Tell Me It's Real series, but it's, yeah, they're, they're just polar opposites in a way.

**Kris:** Other than, I think as time has evolved, they've really, uh, brought up more into the real world and real world world problems versus just being a true fiction, you know, with, uh, of a fictional town or city or, you know, so I mean, you've got, um, human problems that everyone can relate to versus just making it so sugar-coated that, you know.

**Janice:** And I, I throw these books out, his books out, especially How to Be a Normal Person. That one's particularly special to me.

I adore that book. Um, that was the beginning of my journey in learning so much more about, asexuality, yes, and demisexuality and so much more. I had a limited vocabulary. Um. Prior to reading, um, particularly TJ's books. He, his representation is brilliant. And so you get to learn about these things.

**Brett W.:** My God, I've had to learn so much with him. I never knew what an asexual was, yay for How to Be a Normal Person, which that was another book that last year I had read with this little group and it caused so much talk.

We sat in our chat, my chat room on Skype just discussing how we, none of us never understood what does asexualism meant and that book shines so much light, and then also gave a huge amount of topics. And then also with Bear, Otter, and the Kid, when we start getting these crosslines, when a character, like Corey/Kori comes into the mix, so now we're dealing with the gender fluidness that none of us understood.

And it was so great to be able to just sit and discuss this with each other and realize how much people are changing and accepting each other more and more because of somebody like him.

**Kirt:** Queer literature has come a long way. So far that I was able to walk into my local Barnes & Noble and buy TJ's latest book, a queer story by a queer author. And we'll be celebrating more diversity in TJ's writing in the coming episodes. But there's also a long way to go before we can say our work as advocates and allies is done. I'll let TJ have the last word.

**TJ:** [00:10:08] Well, obviously at this point we're not always the stereotypical side characters who are either there to be overtly flamboyant or to get sick and die, or to be beaten because we're queer.

[00:10:23] That still happens in 2020 that still happens and you know, whatever it is what it is. But we've, I, we've moved, we're, we're S we've moved a lot farther away from the days of bury your gays, and though it still happens in all forms of media, obviously we're still fighting to be included in stuff like the Marvel movies and Star Wars where they can say, here's your representation, and it's a two second kiss, and we're being fed scraps and told it's a full meal, and we're being told to love it, and we don't have to, obviously we shouldn't because that's bullshit. But when it comes to literature, it's a lot. It's a, it's advanced a lot more. Um, especially in YA. YA is at the forefront of diversity. Um, and that's wonderful. I, I, I wish that, that we saw that more in adult literature. Um, we need queer people telling queer stories. We need people of color telling their stories. We have to have own voices because own voices matter now more than ever.