

Episode 9: The Ink Beneath My Skin

TJ: people that get tattoos inspired by my work, that is humbling and lovely and wonderful, and , if you want to put it on your body, you're an adult you can make that decision knowing full well that it's probably forever. I'm totally okay with that.

And it's, I love it. It's absolutely wonderful and lovely.

Kirt: Welcome to the Klunatics Podcast. I'm Kirt Graves. This week, we are diving deep. Like, under the skin deep. We're talking about tattoos. What the hell do tattoos have to do with TJ Klune? Well, if you're one of the Klunatics who have paid tribute to TJ's writing by allowing another human to stab you repeatedly with a needle in order to permanently etch his words or images on your body...a lot.

Mia: This is Mia Sciberras, and I'm at Third Eye Tattoo, a tattoo parlor in Melbourne, Australia, and I'm about to get my first Klunatic inspired tattoo.

Kirt: We're going to let producer Mia get her ink on, but don't worry. We'll check back in later. Here's Shannon from Episode 7, who is a tattoo artist, explaining what a tattoo is.

Shannon: Basically, it's a scar that we're giving you that we put ink into, so we are breaking your skin and not all seven layers, but you're breaking a few and you are embedding the ink into that.

It depends on the type of tattoo you're getting. Obviously to stick and pokes were the original. but now, technology has changed and there's lots of new methods to get that into your skin, but they're scars.

Kirt: are any of these methods, not stabbing you with tiny needles?

Shannon: No. All of the methods are stabbing you with tiny needles.

Sorry.

Kirt: But it turns out that legal and socially acceptable stabbing isn't a new concept.

Chris Spode: My name is Chris and I'm from Brazil, but currently I live in Miami, US.

Chris is going to be our Tattoo Historian for this episode.

Chris Spode: So concerning the history and meaning of tattoos, they were a big part of many ancient societies, mostly made using soot and ashes as ink and different kinds of handmade instruments. Scholars found historical mummies carrying tattoos in 49 different locations all around the globe. From Alaska to Egypt, from China to Russia, we have evidence that tattoos were already performed as far as 3000 years before Christ.

but for the reason those tattoos were made, there are several different theories and they change according to the region and time of the findings.

Kirt: Chris told me that in Asia, tattoos were considered evil, because literature from the time only depicts the bad guys as having tattoos. Conversely, in Egypt, tattoos served a more decorative and ceremonial purpose.

Chris Spode: A particular study shows, even that tattoos in ancient Egypt were used as a medical treatment reserved for women only. Made mostly with bronze needles used as a carving instrument, only in 300 before Christ is that tattoos started to be also performed in Egyptian man.

Kirt: In other words, Egyptian women were badasses.

Shannon: did you know that in, Vietnamese culture, , the rite of passage for a girl, when she turns 13 that their makeup is tattooed?

Kirt: No.

Shannon: Yeah. So, depending on where you are and where you're from, tattoos generally change. why they came about, how they are, like Polynesian culture, it's mandatory for the woman to have tattoos, but it's optional for the men.

Kirt: Correction. All women are badasses.

Shannon: but really when you get down to it, traditionally tattoos are a journey. They're your story. So whether your history was marking those, milestones in your life. whether it was that rite of passage as you're growing into adulthood, whether it was whatever reasoning behind it, all of it is to tell a story.

So when you're sitting down with your grandkids and they point to a spot on your body. You could tell them where you were, at what point in your life you were, what you were thinking, what you were going through. , it's a visual memory. and like scent memories this is one that's built from pain.

So you absolutely will remember where you were, what you were doing, and who you were at that point in time when you got that tattoo. So really, it's whether it was a status symbol or a rite of passage. Tattoos are your story. It's your journey. It's just a visual representation of your journey.

Melanie: Hi, my name's Melanie, and I'm from Germany.

Kirt: Melanie has three TJ Klune inspired tattoos.

Melanie: So the first one was, Ox's eyes. it's, my, all left forearm and it looks like, like claws opened up my skin and , the eyes, show up beneath it.

It's not exactly a black wolf so it's black and gray. in the inside of my left forearm, I have, the blue feather for Cal, and it spans from my wrist to my elbow, and it's just, the feather that's with a lot of blue shades, and it looks pretty real.

My mom loves it.

Kirt: I love that. what color are Ox's eyes in the first tattoo?

Melanie: They are red.

Kirt: Okay.

Melanie: Of course he had to change the color.

Kirt: I was just thinking that.

I was like, Hm, I wonder.

Melanie: Yeah, but I will not change it, I like it as it is.

Kirt: Yeah, absolutely.

Kirt: For podcast narrative purposes, I'm going to save the reveal of Melanie's third tattoo until later. In the meantime, let's hear about some more tattoos. Here's James, who met in Episode 6.

James: It's a, it's a quote from Tales from Virginia. "when I look upon these stars, there's nothing I wish for more than you". So from the end of the book. yeah, I just kind of always, I was wanting to get a tattoo and it's kind of, and I thought, why not get a quote from the book, like, it's like a book that means a lot. It means a lot to me.

Dene: Hi. My name is Dene Young and I'm from Colorado. Um, so my first tattoo is almost completed. I got the dragon from A Wish Upon The Stars, the star dragon. So it's kind of like a connect the dots when you look at it. Tattoo. I drew it myself, so I'm real proud of it. But, when you look at it, it's a galaxy in the background.

So outside of the dragon, there's purples and pinks and oranges, and they're swirling together around it, and there's little stars. But the main focus is the star dragon, and it's a huge piece that covers my whole thigh. So it starts at the top of the Dragon's head and it's more like where his eye is, and that's the biggest star on the piece.

And then slowly, if you connect each of the little stars together. It forms into this big, huge dragon, but just takes up my whole thigh. He's colored in greens and blues and purples. My second tattoo, I have artists who sketch it out for me. It's some Joe and ox from Wolf song. It's a yin and yang of the two wolves following after each other, and each of the middle of the wolves are the red eyes of the alpha.

Kirt: I was about to say, if you only got a Lightning Struck Heart tattoo after finding TJ through Green Creek, I was going to be like, what's up with that?

Dene: So that one I haven't gotten yet, but almost, so my other one's almost done, but they closed down all the tattoo places out here, so I'm not able to finish it yet.

Kirt: Here's Amy, who we also met in Episode 6, describing her two Klunatic tattoos.

Amy: They are both from How to Be a Normal Person, because that is the book of my heart. the first one I got, I actually got it. I'd been planning it, it's my very first tattoo and I had been planning it for a bit.

And then one day I had gone to therapy and I was like, today is the day. And I just stopped at the tattoo parlor and I got a tattoo on my arm that says, "today is going to be an okay day"

And then my other one is, I got it at the Klunatics event in October.

And so it says, "abnormal and weird and strange". And I also got that, that's also from How to Be a Normal Person.

Kirt: What was that day like? is that from Shannon or did you guys go to somebody who was doing them?

Amy: Shannon did it. And that was amazing, and it took two hours and 45 minutes. It was a long time, but it was such a great experience to be with the Klunatics and get something that has to do with the Klunatics.

Shannon: Oh my Klunatics, gods how I love you. Each tattoo that I've done so far on Klunatics has been personal to them for a different reason.

And I loved all of that. being able to get to tattoo them and do this thing for them. but TJ is what brought us all together. So, being able to experience that, that love for TJ and our love for each other, and the trust that they were showing in getting these tattoos was everything I could have asked for and more.

I'm so, so very grateful, for TJ, for writing all the books that he has because it's, it's brought me to my found family and I could not be more grateful.

Amy: And that book means so much to me. And having that on my skin like forever is just. I've always wanted a tattoo and I never got one. And , when I came up with these, I'm like, these I can live with forever because they, they are a part of me already.

Kirt: I think that's the best expression for a tattoo. Just putting something on the outside that's already on the inside.

and I'm happy to hear that your next one will be Green Creek?

Amy: Yes.

Yes, no. Well it is. I want it. I want to have pack, pack, pack, and I want to have, a raven and some roses. And I also want to have Theodore, the Wyvern from the House in the Cerulean Sea, I'm actually planning, I, Shannon and I are going to get together and we're going to plan a whole, I'm going to have a Klune sleeve is basically my goal.

Kirt: Well, that'll be amazing.

Amy: I know, I'm so excited. And then maybe I'll put on my other arm. I'll put something to do with my kids .

Kirt: Yeah. If they deserve it. How many books have they written?

Amy: none. And they don't even like TJ Klune books.

Kirt: I don't know that they've earned a tattoo yet.

And I only feel a little bit bad about peer pressuring you about Green Creek.

Amy: No, but it really is part of my, it's part of the future.

Kirt: Okay, good.

Chris Spode: We have a great example in Samoa, a beautiful island in the South Pacific considered the place that originated several kinds of ritualistic tattoos. We have records of tattoos being performed as an important part of the Samoan traditions for over 2000 years.

It's even believed that the English word tattoo originated from the Samoan word "tatau". Using ancient tools made from turtle shells and boar's teeth, the tradition of giving and receiving tattoos by hand in Samoa is a legacy passed from fathers to sons, and most of the time involved rituals that could take weeks to be completed.

Little has changed in this traditions, and perhaps the most notable thing to Samoan culture is the high praise that tattoos hold and the noble meaning behind it. Tattooing ceremonies are usually held to mark a younger chief's ascension to a leadership role in society, representing their dedication and commitment to their culture and as a symbol of great endurance.

Since the tattooing process can actually be extremely painful and can take weeks.

Kirt: So If these things are so painful why do we do it?

Kirt: So in your experience what are you finding are the most common inspirations for tattoos?

And do people use book stuff a lot?

Shannon: Yeah. I would say the two, most, the two most common now tattoos that I've been doing would be for loss, I do a lot of memorial pieces a lot, and I don't know if you knew this, but you can actually, ashes are sterile, so you can actually make ashes in with the ink.

whether it be human or animal remains. but tattoos for loss, a person that's left your life. So a lot of memorial pieces and fandoms. Lots of fandoms. So, yes, books, movies, TV shows, comic books, things from your childhood, lots of nostalgia. But I would say those are the two most common, things because either people like it visually.

it had some, emotional impact on their life. And stories do that. You read a book and it just changes you and it stays with you. they want to express that in a visual medium.

Kirt: You lost me on animal remains, but okay.

Shannon: Hey, okay, so I rescue snakes. It's a weird thing that happens.

I had a rescue that I, I finally had to have him put down, because of lots of medical reasons, I was just crushed.

I was heartbroken.

So when I found out that we could use the remains in the tattoo, I was so excited because I always wanted to get a tattoo for him. So I'm 100% gonna mix his remains in with ink when I do it, I'm going to do it on myself.

Kirt: Great, great for you. Not a thing I'm going to be doing.

Kirt: By now you're probably wondering, does TJ have any tattoos? The answer is yes. And now you're trying to picture where they are. And now it just got awkward because you pictured something naughty, didn't you?

TJ: I have three. I have the Legend of Zelda triforce on my wrist because one, I'm an uber nerd and two, that was a video game that I played with my father. Oh, I remember that distinctly.

It was a game that we played together before he passed away. The very first Legend of Zelda game. We played that on Nintendo. And, he died when I was five years old. And I have two very clear distinct memories of him. One is playing Legend of Zelda and two is him taking me to a park, getting on a merry go round, and I'm sitting in his lap with a milkshake, and I take a drink of it and I get my very first brain freeze.

That those are two very clear memories I have of him. So getting the tattoo of the Legend of Zelda is my little way of honoring him.

And then I also, on my left forearm, I have the words, "let's go", which was in honor of Eric Arvin before he passed away.

But my very first tattoo is such a cliché and it's stupid. I was 18 years old and I thought I was hot shit and fuck society, I don't need any of that. So what does an 18 year old queer guy do when he's on a road trip with his friends in California and sees a, a vendor tattoo set up on the boardwalk with Kanji symbols behind him, you get a Kanji symbol on your arm that says

Kirt: I'm doing that thing again where I build anticipation by withholding information. It's annoying right? OK, fine, here's the rest:

TJ: so what does an 18 year old queer guy do when he's on a road trip with his friends in California and sees a, a vendor tattoo set up on the boardwalk with Kanji symbols behind him, you get a Kanji symbol on your arm that says "dream".

So So those are my tattoos.

Kirt: And since I'm revealing things over here, here's Melanie describing her third tattoo.

Melanie: and this year on Valentine's Day, I got the quote from, it first appeared in Ravensong "may "may our songs always be heard". And there's a little wolf sitting on his hinds and howling at the beside it.

And that's on my neck.

Kirt: And remember Mia, who was just sitting down to get a new tattoo done at the beginning of the episode?

Mia: So . My tattoo that I've just gotten is of two ravens, which is obviously inspired by Ravensong and a big nod to Gordo. And the reason I chose those in particular is because for me, Gordo is probably the most integral character of the Green Creek series. He is that linchpin that holds all of these characters together, brings them together, makes them stay together in some ways, and enjoys calling everybody out when things aren't going right.

Kirt: Well said Mia. Finally someone talks about the greatest tattooed character in the history of the world in my extremely unbiased opinion as simply a casual observer of the TJ Klune literary oeuvre.

Kirt: So tattoos also play a part in the Green Creek series, which frankly, we have not talked about enough and we are going to talk about it now. Why am I doing this whole thing of it's not a commercial for the work I did.

TJ: Right, exactly.

Kirt: Yeah.

so where did the inspiration come from to have Gordo's magic channeled through tattoos?

TJ: Honestly, it came from the idea of me liking the image of Gordo's tattoos glowing, the idea of glowing moving tattoos that would almost look like a watercolor painting in motion just would not get out of my head. And I think that, especially in the first book, I hinted at the idea that Gordo's tattoos, not just the raven or the roses could move.

And then I obviously explored that more in his own book with the idea that the, the raven could move a lot and that the roses that the raven was resting on would, bloom. And I don't know, it just. I think that there is something very cinematic about that.

Kirt: are all of Gordo's , tattoos magical, or does he have any that are just tattoos?

TJ: He had, he has the one on his chest that he got after Mark left him of the wolf, of Mark's wolf. And that is mundane, but it's probably the most important one that he has.

Kirt: Aw.

TJ: Aw. Aw. It is. Romance.

And Brothersong will see Gordo unleashed. He is going to be not the same magic wise as he used to be because he'll realize at the very end of Heartsong, spoilers, he saw something happen with his tattoos that his father planned and put in place years and years and years

before. And so Gordo is going to find out what happens when those plans are removed from his skin.

Kirt: I look forward to finding out more in the future.

Kirt: Its almost time to wrap this up, but before we go, some practical advice on getting your very own TJ Klune-inspired tattoo!

Melanie: I think I can't go with a marijuana leaf on the cover because I work with public administration and I don't think that would go over well.

Kirt: Yeah, you're probably thinking correctly there.

Melanie: So I have to look for a way. Maybe I should do a reread and look for a quote.

Kirt: Yeah, well maybe we can crowdsource it. once the podcast comes out, we can be like, what are your Gus tattoo ideas? We'll see what people come up with.

TJ: don't make bets with people , and if you lose, you have to get whatever tattoo of something.

Don't do that. That's stupid. Just if you want to get a tattoo, make sure you want it, cause it is forever.

Kirt: Yeah. And they're putting it on their bodies and you created it.

TJ: It is

Kirt: And it's there forever.

TJ: I, I thought that my words on people's bodies was strange and awesome enough, but then when people get, like

There's, there's some places that people have gotten tattoos of my stuff that I just don't understand. Why do you need, why do you need my words on your inner thigh? What is that? What is that?

Because what happens when you get into a relationship and you're getting intimate with your new partner and they're like, "Hey, I'm about to go to your downtown area to have some fun. Oh, I guess I'm going to have to do some reading."

I'm just like, Oh, well, you know, but at the same time, if you really want to make that work in my benefit. At that point, make a recommendation. Be like, yes, when we finish, I have a book for you to read.

Kirt: I was gonna say, maybe it's some kind of litmus test that if they get, if they get that far and they go, "Oh my God, I love TJ Klune."

Time to go, time to go to pound town.

TJ: They can actually proceed with their, with their hedonism, that's wonderful.

Kirt: But if they look at the tattoo and go, what's this?

They're done.

so I was thinking that like tattoos would be like the weirdest thing that somebody would send you, and obviously that is not the case.

TJ: I've gotten

pictures that I don't want to talk about because the fact that men were sending me nudes, because apparently if you're a queer dude who writes queer romance, it's totally okay for people to send you pictures of their dicks next to your books.

So yeah. Anyways, let's move on to tattoos.

Kirt: No, like, for comparison sake, or?

TJ: I remember the first time it happened, somebody, somebody sent me a picture of their dick next to a picture of my book saying, you, the sex scene you wrote may be hard.

I was like, Oh, Oh my. Oh dear God. I've had that. Yeah, that's happened.

Kirt: And you married in the spring.

TJ: Right? That's how I knew it was true love. And I got to see your penis before I saw your face.

Kirt: **So just to clarify, Please Please Please don't send TJ naked pictures, of any kind for any reason. It's really not his thing. Send them to Micheal Lesley instead.**

Kirt: So if somebody wants a tattoo, like what kind of research and preparation should they be putting into it so that they have a positive experience?

Shannon: if it's your first tattoo or you're just not sure, I would just say, take the time. Take the time to, find out, make sure you really want it. For me, I'm one of those people that I don't, just, especially even now that I can just get my machine out and do what I want.

I still spend a minimum of a month going through what I want to make sure that it's something that I want on my body forever. If it's going to be in a visible place, a lot of times I will draw it on myself and repeatedly to make sure that that's something that I want there.

so as long as you're still thinking about it daily for at least a month, then you know you really want this thing on your body forever, so you're not regretting it later. And when it comes down to your artists, I just say, obviously it's a lot easier now than it was, being able to search their, search their Instagram or their Facebook page because they can, or Twitter or whatever, cause they can share their art there so you can see their art style.

Back in the day, you had to go and actually go to the shops and go through their books and talk to them. but also talk to your artists and make sure that you've got a good vibe. If you're

going to be sitting in a chair with them for three plus hours, you want to make sure that they're a person that you gel with and you like, the environment.

You want this to be an enjoyable experience. so talk with your artist, look at their work, make sure that that's what speaks to you. And then, I mean, everybody's different. but I, to avoid the the regret, I would say just make sure you actually really want it. I mean, most anything can be covered up.

So, I mean.

Kirt: With more tattoos.

Shannon: Yes. With more tattoos

So I would have just advise covering it up with another tattoo. But honestly regret, like the whole tattoo regret thing. I do a lot of cover ups and there's a lot of people that have that tattoo on their body and I always just say, you know, you just like an ex boyfriend, you wanted this at some point in your life for a reason, right?

This was something that you wanted. When you look back at your life and you think about it. And you and you just twinge with like the regret or the like, whatever that negative emotion is. When you think back about something that's happened past in your life, that just means that you've grown as a person.

It just means that you've matured and you've grown and you're different than who you are. It's not necessarily something to regret. It just shows that like you are different from where you were. So if you cover that up, absolutely, go for it, cover it up with the thing that you are now. But don't take on that horrible negative connotation.

Everybody has missteps. , you know, it's only a mistake if you don't learn from it to just grow and keep going.

TJ: Whatever specific words or phrase or image that they have put on them, what it means to them specifically, but I have to trust that they, that's something that they wanted and that it's good for them. So anybody that wants to do that totally fine. Just make it tasteful, please. That's all I ask.

Kirt: and only send a picture if it's in a tasteful spot.

Kirt: Speaking of good taste...I was curious if it was at all a part of Shannon's training to advise someone against getting a tattoo.

Shannon: there are a lot of artists that, want you to come to them with your idea. Like, that won't take people who just walk in and want to pick something out of a book. they'll make them think about it and want to come back.

Now, I had a girl come in the other day and wanted her boyfriend's initials on her ass cheek. It was small. It was about an inch long, and I said, listen, when, not if you want me to cover

this up, I will be here. Here's my card. And I went ahead and gave her the JT that she wanted on her ass.

It's your body and you're an adult. If you can walk in and sign the paperwork and say, this is what I want, , then go right ahead. I don't, it's not for me to decide what you want to do. Do I know sometimes that you're making a bad decision abso-freaking-lutely but at the end of the day, I'm not your mom. Like, you do you.

Whatever makes you happy,

that answer the question? I don't even know.

Kirt: I think so. I don't know. *(Laughter)*