

## Somber Music

**Kirt (From Wolfsong):**

*I learned much about the wolves over the past few days. Heightened sense of smell, of hearing.*

*They could heal, they could shift half shift, full shift. Alphas and betas and Omegas. Those omegas were dark things. Scary things, feral and without their tethers.*

## \*\*\*Record Scratch\*\*\*

**Kirt:** Nope. Nope, nope, nope. This episode isn't about *that* type of Alpha/beta relationship. We'll visit that later on in another podcast episode. In this episode, we're going to talk about the writing process and about the relationship between TJ and his two betas; what it is, what they do, and why beta reading is an important part of a book's journey towards publication.

## \*\*\*Theme Music\*\*\*

All you need to know before we start is that a "beta reader" is someone who reads an early draft of a manuscript for the express purpose of giving the author feedback that may influence the final product.

Before TJ, Lynn and Mia get to elaborate on that, we asked a few of the other producers what they thought a beta reader was. They were supposed to take this question seriously...

**Susannah:** So a beta reader, a beta reader will read an early copy of a book and go through and find everything that's wrong with it and then return it to the author. And then the best part is they spend the next two years prior to the books released, teasing the author's fan base with phrases like, I can't wait for you to read this book.

And. You're going to love this so much, and this book broke me, and let's just say it had the sexiest duel scene you will ever read.

**Jon:** A beta reader. Yeah. It's normally the third drag queen in the lineup. The first one being the alpha, the second one being the beta, and the third one coming out and making fun of the first two's outfits. That's a beta reader.

**Angela:** Okay. Well, you see kids when an alpha loves the beta very much, they have a special kind of hug that, or is that Omega says whatever it is. I'm pretty sure it happens in the woods and you know, I didn't know it was going to be this kind of podcast when I signed on.

**Jon:** In ancient times, they were called secret keepers. You see, aside from the author, the beta reader is the one charged with a knowledge of things that could be, things that shouldn't be, and things that are yet to pass.

**Kirt:** Yeah, we should probably ask the experts.

**TJ:** [00:00:18] I have two. I have Mia and Lynn, and Lynn was the first to come on board back in two.

Well, I had, I had had other beta readers before and just wasn't quite working out the way that that I wanted to. I don't need smoke blown up my ass. Okay. I know I can write. I know I can write good. I everyday I want to get better at what I do. I need people to help me get better at what I do. Because if you, if you go into it and your, your beta comments are full of only compliments and nothing about how to get better, you don't grow as a writer.

You don't, you don't. You have to get constructive criticism to be able to grow. And since I don't read reviews or anything like that, then the best people that can get it from has to be the beta readers.

**Lynn:** [00:00:00]: "Hi, I'm Lynn Schmitz. I'm a beta reader for TJ Klune, and I live in Woodbridge Virginia."

**Mia:** Hi, my name's Mia Sciberras. I live in Melbourne, Australia, though I'm originally from New Zealand and I am one of TJ's beta readers.

**Mia:** [00:01:00]: So what is a beta reader? Beta reader is the person that essentially an author uses to read a manuscript that they've literally just finished. So they may have gone through and done some self editing, they may have had somebody do a quick proofread or they may have proof-read themselves. But usually it's pretty much an unedited, unproof-read script. And the idea of sending it through to a beta reader is to have somebody who is independent of their brain read through it and go this makes sense, or this doesn't make sense, or what the fuck were they thinking when they wrote this? Or, Oh my God, this is the best thing I've ever read. And essentially it's an opportunity for the author to get that immediate feedback.

**Kirt (TJ interview):** [00:06:13]: At what point in the writing process do you, do you use the beta's? Like how many people before them have seen it and how many people see it after?"

**TJ:** [00:06:21]: I am the only one that's seen it before they get it. And I will write the first, first draft of a book, and then I will usually step away from said book for however long the length of time I need to get some distance, and then I'll come back and I'll do a second draft and then a third draft, and then I sometimes will even do a fourth draft that is specifically for me just looking for places to cut, and then I send it off to them. They do their magic, and then I get it back and I rewrite based upon their comments and feedback.

And then I send it off to my agent, typically, and then she has her own notes that she puts in. Then I'll rework those and then I'll send it off to the publisher.

**Kirt (TJ Interview):** [00:07:07]: So they are really like your first line of defense?

**TJ:** [00:07:11]: Yep. They are. Which is why it's important that I trust them to know what they're doing, which is why it's gotten so much easier."

**Kirt: Lynn Schmitz has read TJ's books from the beginning, starting with Bear, Otter and the Kid in 2011. In her own words**

**Lynn:** [00:00:54]: "... So I remember looking on Dreamspinner Press their website and looking at upcoming titles. And I saw Bear, Otter and the Kid. And this was back in 2011 and it looked interesting and I bought it and I just fell in love with the characters. I loved the story. It was just different, you know, it wasn't typical to what I had been reading up till then, in that genre at least.

So, um, I just liked the style of the writing. I just thought it was deeper.”

**TJ:** [00:00:18]: “ So I. Wrote The Extraordinaries in 2017 and I needed a new beta reader, and then all of a sudden Lynn was at, uh, God, I can't even remember how we even touched base on that, how we started talking about it, but all I know is that at GRL that year, I sat down with her after she had read The Extraordinaries and she started, she started going on about the parts that she liked and I was like, Oh great, this is going to be just another thing where everything is loved.

And then she started tearing me a new one on just like little minor details. And I was sitting there like, going, thinking, who the hell does she think she is? And then I stopped and thought, Oh, right, yes, this is what I want. This is what I need. And then we got, um, Lynn said sometime after that, uh, it wasn't too long after that.

Lynn said that Mia was open to wanting to do beta reading as well. And I said, sure, we can see how it works outn said that Mia was open to wanting to beta reading as well. And I said sure, we can see how it works.”

**Kirt: As Mia puts it...**

**Mia:** [00:02:00]: I was having a conversation with Lynn, ~~who is TJ's her beta, his original beta reader~~ on messenger one day about something that was a little bit independent of beta reading.

And she was like. How did she put it? I can't remember how she put it. I did read through the other day, um, went back through the posts and it was essentially going, Oh, I know you've beta read. I'd really like to have somebody back me up with the beta reading that I'm doing. Would you like to beta read for TJ?

Let me go ask him. So that's how I got dragged in to becoming a beta reader for TJ, and when I say dragged in, I mean I ran through that door screaming and yelling and waving my arms going, yes, this is the best day ever. So you know, the opportunity, obviously to become, a beta reader for TJ was rather exciting at the time.

**TJ:** [00:00:18]: And now we're pretty much a well-oiled machine because they've, they've beta read what, at least like eight, nine, 10 books for me now.”

**Kirt: Mia let me know that she's up to eleven books now, and Lynn has actually completed fourteen. Seven of these are yet to be published.**

**Lynn:** [00:02:24]: “So he knew I worked with PFLAG, and I think that could be why he asked me to read The Extraordinaries. That was the first book I ever read, just to make sure that it was appropriate, you know, it didn't have any content that wasn't appropriate for the age group, and just, you know, whether I liked the story or not.

So I gave it back to him and I was pretty critical of it because, you know, I love the characters and once I fall in love with the character, you better treat him right the whole time. So I kind of told them some things like that, and I guess he liked the feedback. So he asked me the next day if I would be a beta reader for him.”

**Lynn:** [00:05:24]: “... sso I read The Extraordinaries first, and then the second book I read was How to Be a Movie Star. And I had a lot of questions about that book at the beginning.

Like a lot of what the fuck moments, um, as, and I just wished I had somebody to bounce ideas off of. And so I talked to TJ and asked if I could bring Mia on.

I didn't know that she beta read. I just knew that she was super smart and very well read and I just thought she would be good. And so it was just an instinct and it turned out it was just a great collaboration, a great team. We work very well together."

**Kirt** (Lynn's interview): 00:06:05: "So how does the process work? Cause if you wanted somebody to bounce ideas off of, obviously that means you're not just going back to TJ and like chatting with him."

**Lynn**: [00:06:44]: "okay. So I will get a book and instructions, cause usually, well, always TJ will give me specific things he wants me to look for. Um. Things he's trying to convey, wants to make sure that I get that and I look for those things.

Um, so I'll read it once through just for fun, really. And I'll note a few things here and there that I want to come back to. And then the second time is the hard look at it. And then the third time, and sometimes the last is, I let Microsoft Word read it to me, which is the most painful thing that you could possibly endure, but I do it because you catch little words that you wouldn't catch in the other way.."

**Lynn**: [00:07:44]: "So after I finish my edits and put my comments together I send that to Mia."

**Mia**: [00:03:00]: "...Most authors, when they have beta readers, they Don't get the beta readers to collaborate. So they will send their, um, the manuscripts out to different people with different requests and they then get it back and they collate that feedback. What happens with Lynn and I, for, um, TJ's beta reading is Lynn receives the manuscript first with TJ's instructions, and she will generally do, um, a first read through, uh, and start thinking about, of her ideas and her thoughts and making her comments and notes on the page and recommendations and what the fuckeries and things like that. And she'll be messaging me most of the time going, Oh my God, I can't wait for you to read this and Holy crap, and I don't know what TJ was thinking. And so she'll be sending me little messages and I'll be just like oh for fuck's sake, can you just send me the manuscript already. But she usually has it for a couple of weeks, up to six weeks, I think before I'll, I'll get it. And in that time she will usually have read it twice, uh, maybe two and a half times. And then she will send through. That manuscript with her notes through to me so that I can start doing my read through, ."

**Mia**: [00:09:00]: "The first read through, you'll be like, is that right? And then you'll do the second read through and you'll be like, hold on. No, that's not right at all. And then by, by the fourth read, you're pretty comfortable that you've got it right and you're just double checking some grammar and spelling and just small things like that."

**Mia**: [00:08:00]: "... the process has changed over time because Heartsong and Brothersong, Lynn and I, I know I read both four times and I had to read them that many times to get a really good understanding of some of the nuances of the story, to understand what's going on within the story, to make sure there are consistencies in terms of things like what people look like, what they say, the names of people".

**Mia**: [00:08:00]: "...so some of the things that you have to look for when you're a beta reader are things around like consistency and, and, and in the, um, Oh gosh, At First Sight series,

Nana, her name is Gigi. But when we got Why We Fight TJ called her something else, and I'm like, hold on. That's not her name.

And he was like, huh, I couldn't remember a name.”

**Lynn:** [00:08:27]: “Well, if he wants a character to act a certain way, he wants me to make sure that they're keeping in line with that, that they're not too annoying sometimes. Where it's too long, where it drags. I always keep count of where I've put the book down because my goal is to make it not putdownable. I just capitalized that, so that's a word. But you know, there are, I keep track of it cause there's sometimes I'm putting a book down a lot of times and that's where I think it would be good to cut it or re-examine it at least.”

**Kirt: I asked TJ about the kinds of feedback that he receives from Lynn and Mia as well as asking the ladies about the type of feedback they provide TJ. What were the sorts of things that stuck with them throughout the beta reading process?**

**TJ:** [00:04:05]: “s, it usually stems from me and that's, that's unfortunate because there should be, so there usually is some consistency, but then then they'll get like a 10,000 word email from me every time I send them a book saying, Hey, this is what I need you to look for this time I used the word just, like, a billion times. So just make sure you go through and delete every instance of the word just when it shouldn't be in there. Because I have crutch words that I lean on. I use just, of course, I mean, in fact, I use those all the freaking time and it's, that's how a writer hap, it happens.

You, you have crutch words that you depend on. And so I, I have them look at that kind of stuff and cut all of that, but they, they are. Oh man. They, by now with how many books they've done for me. They are a well oiled machine. Like for example, The Extraordinaries 2 is 150,000 words. They way they've read it probably like three or four times a piece.

And they got it back to me in like two weeks. I was like, Jesus Christ, that's, I don't know how you guys do that, but I am okay with it. And, and it is, um, I'm lucky in that for the most part, they usually tend to agree on everything, but sometimes they don't, and that's when it, that's when it gets to be my decision because if, if two, if two people are telling you that something is wrong, that's wrong, there's something wrong, then obviously, but if one person says, I think this is wrong, I think this needs to be fixed, and the other person says, Oh, I think this is fine how it is.

I have to make a decision at that point on who, who I think is right in that case, and there's not one person that's right more than the other. They're, I sometimes go with what Mia says. I sometimes would go what, Lynn says, and. It's rare, but every now and then I say, ah, you guys don't know what the fuck you're talking about with this, so I'm going to keep it how it is.”

**Lynn:** [00:09:16]: “... I can't let a mistake go by, if I see something and not mark it, cos I don't know that somebody else won't. And my goal is to make it the best book it can be.”

**Lynn:** [00:10:00]: “...We find things all the time and we're questioning it. Like, why is this? Why is this here? This doesn't need to be here. You know, are you trying to do something with this we don't know about or something?”

**Lynn:** [00:09:16]: ‘And I think that's why I brought Mia on because I've gotten comments back from her that made me go back and re-examine how I felt about something. And then,

if I can resolve that, then I'll take, tell TJ, this is how I felt about it at first but now I agree with her"

**Mia:** [00:13:00]: "So being a New Zealander who lives in Australia, there are some things that TJ puts in his books that drives me nuts and I don't understand like, what the fuck is flatwear? And it took me and I, and I say this to him every time, I'm like, can you use like cutlery or anything, but, but you know, if there's certain words or phrases that are obviously very regional to his part of the US where I'm like, nobody else in the world understands what the fuck you're going on about.

But there was one where we were talking about, um, about cutlery and he put in silverware and we're like, "they're werewolves". And he was like, "Oh fucking werewolves", because of course werewolves are allergic to silver. And I was just like, that's just the funniest thing, **you're being a dickhead**. But, but it'll be things like, I really love this character.

Whoa, what the fuck is going on here? Or, um. Even sometimes cause he gives us pretty clear notes of the sorts of things he wants us to look for. So, for example, in Extraordinaries 2, um, the manuscript at the moment, he wants advice on how to remove over 20,000 words. That's a big call. That's a really hard call.

So, um, I've made a call, but he might not like it or he might disagree or Lynn might disagree. And that's fine.."

**Mia:** [00:15:50]: "in Why We Fight, um, which has been released, so I can talk about that. Obviously it's based in 2016 during the whole presidential election and all the shit that was going on there with, with the orange Cheeto that you guys now have as your president. And when I first read it, I was like, Oh, this is really political. This is super political. And for me, I was like is it ness, is it unnecessarily political?

And then by the time I went back and read it, I was like, you know what? It needs to be this political. So some of it is may self-editing as I'm going through with my feedback

"**TJ:** [00:07:11]: "... Cause I, I know now their editing styles and they know now what my rough drafts look like. And, um, it, it, it's, it's a very streamlined process by this point. But I kind of shook that up I think a little bit, cause I just sent them a, another book that is completely unlike, for the most part, something that I've never really written before.

So I'm going to be curious to see what they do. It's super dark and twisted and weird, so I don't know. It's, it's. We're, we're used to each other and I know how they work. They know how I work, and it's, it just makes things so much easier to have people like that that I can trust and they know they'll, they'll, they'll give compliments, which is nice to be able to read that, but they also know that I don't need to hear that kind of stuff.

They know that, that, that it's better for me to hear what's broken rather than what works. ."

**Mia:** [00:17:00]: "...to date, I haven't had to turn around and say, I absolutely hate this. You should delete this because it's just shit. Um, but I have done that with other authors. So it's, it's not, not just cause I love TJ and his work, it's just simply, I haven't been able to say something is shit so far.."

TJ: [00:08:35]: “You know, it’s, it’s important to me. Honesty is important. I have to have honesty because how can I become a better writer if nobody’s going to be honest with me. That’s just not how it works.”

**Kirt: I then asked if he’d ever had to scrap a project, based on feedback he’d received or based on his own perception. Here’s what he had to say:**

TJ: [00:09:55]: “I have, I have probably six or seven half unfinished books I’ve written. Wolfsong. I almost didn’t finish Wolfsong because I didn’t like how it was going.

So I stopped and wrote another book entirely and came back and came back to it and read through. It, changed some things, didn’t have Ox and Mark have sex like I had originally thought I was going to, and then I, um, was able to work through it. So.

Kirt: [00:10:21] What?

TJ: [00:10:23] Yeah, that was my original outline. While that three years, one month and twenty-six days happened, Mark and Ox were going to sleep together. But then I realized that was kind of gross, so I didn’t do that. So we’ve moved on from there.

Kirt: [00:10:39] Okay. Wow. I feel like

TJ: [00:10:42] The stuff you’ll learn.

Kirt: [00:10:43] Hot take.

TJ: [00:10:44] Yeah.

**Kirt: One of the things that fascinated me is the fact that Lynn and Mia are beta-reading books that are literally years away from publication. *The House in the Cerulean Sea* has just been published, but they both read it originally in February or March of 2018. They read *Brothersong* back in November of the same year. There are seven books they’ve already read, most of which will come out over the next two to three years. I asked them what it was like, knowing all the things...**

Kirt [Lynn’s interview]: [00:20:08]: “Um, so how do you handle knowing the things. ~~Like you just said,~~ you beta read *The Extraordinaries* in 2017, it’s coming out in 2020, so how long, you’ve known this story so long and the only people you can talk to about it are Mia and TJ?”

Lynn: [00:20:26]: “And I can talk to my cat. I do talk to my cat a lot. She’s a big fan, I’m telling you. Okay. She loves TJ. And my husband, I talk to him sometimes. I’m like, what does this mean, you know and, we talk about it, but I think he’s pretty sick of TJ, so there you go. TJ, TJ, TJ. Like. Marcia, Marcia, Marcia.”

Mia: 00:22:00]: But it can be very hard knowing the things like, *Cerulea*, *Cerulean* I read in March of 2018. And it’s being released in March of 2020. That is two years, two whole years of knowing the things and like *Heartsong* and *Brothersong*, knowing everything that happened in that. That was, what was that? That was September, October, November of 2018. We’re in 2020.”

Mia: [00:24:00]: “...So it’s like you have this extreme privilege. And then this extreme pain of not being able to talk about the things.”

**Mia:** [00:24:00]: I'll go to the admins.

I'll go to Lisa and Sita and Elaine, go, Oh my God, I'm beta reading this book. And it's so fucking good. And I wish you guys could read it. And they all just roll their eyes at me and go, shut up. We know. We're so jealous. That's not fair. You can go away now

So, it can be very hard knowing the things. But the, the, the opposite of that means that I can help. Uh, and as, um, Klunatics will be aware, I help TJ tease people because obviously knowing the things means I can tease the things and back him up when he teases the things. So that's always a lot of fun too.”

**Kirt: As readers, we all have our favourite books. And the ladies have their favourite beta reads and their most anticipated books that have yet to be published.**

**Lynn:** [00:21:11]: “I t think Cerulean was my favorite beta read. Because it's just such a great story. Um, everybody is Linus. Everybody is this character. This is the character who goes to work. And you know, he just, he tries so hard just to fly under the radar and get his eight or nine hours in, you know, and he spills a salad dressing on his shirt.

You know, he's going to get demerits and, it's raining and he forgot his umbrella again. I mean, we're all Linus, so I love this book, but, um, so I think I'd have to say that. But I mean, they're all my favorite when they come out. Why We Fight. Oh my gosh. That was so much fun to beta read. So, uh, and In the Lives of Puppets that it's super, it really is.

You'll love it. I can't, I can't wait, but I don't talk about anything. I never have and I can't.”

**Lynn:** [00:22:18] “That's part of the job, yeah. And it's, it's a, it's a big deal to me to be trusted like that with something that's so important, especially for somebody who's been fucked over a few times, you know? So I really appreciate it.

And I think it's very important.”

**Mia:** [00:25:00]: “ Probably Brothersong because it came straight after Heartsong and anybody who's read Heartsong wants to know what happens next. And it was a, it's an emotion. It was an emotional book and it was just like, Oh my God, this is so exciting.

And I don't know if my heart can take it and people are gonna lose their shit over this book and what the fuck is happening now”

**Mia:** [00:27:00]: “the book that I'm most looking forward to see published is, um, probably, and I've got to think of the title cause it might change. Has he... In the Lives of Puppets. It was between that and one of the other ones that's obviously not published yet, but I couldn't, I can't remember if it's the tea house one and TJ will probably kill me because I can't remember the title off the top of my head, but In the Lives of Puppets, um, I did the beta read for that. Um, in July and August of last year, which was just after my mom passed away.

So there's a whole lot that goes along with the feelings associated with that. But it's such a beautiful story and the theme of, you know what it is. I don't know. I can't give anything away cause I, cause I know he hasn't really said much about it as yet, but just the, just the premise and the way that it's written and the way that the things are explored and expanded on and described.

It's just a, it's a really wonderful book and I think the, the three adult publications that are coming out through Tor are just going to blow people's minds because they are three incredibly beautiful books. Um, that are just they're 100% TJ. But like 1000% more, if that makes sense. Like people are gonna lose their minds over these books."

**Lynn:** [00:26:58]: "I'm just excited to see where his career goes now. I'm excited for him, to see these books here that I've read that are going to go to Tor, um, and see what their reaction is going to be to those, because they're going to love them and, uh, I just, I don't know. I feel like we're all, all of the Klunatics were part of this."

**Kirt:** **As someone who rarely reads a book more than once unless it's for work, I was blown away by the fact that Lynn and Mia will read TJ's books for enjoyment even after they've read it so many times during the writing process. And I was curious if they've ever been surprised by something that ended up in a book after it left their hands.**

**Lynn:** [00:24:28]: "Right. I don't really always remember everything that I suggested changing and adding and deleting so. Not really. I did look a couple of times in some of the, there's only been a few, but there's been a couple of times, to see if my change got in there or whatever, but it's, no, not really, but I always like to read the finished copy because that's the polished version, and I'm not the only ones.

We're not the only ones that read it. I mean, he's got editors too that read it after us, and so I just want to see, you know how it turned out.

**Kirt:** So to date, at least, there haven't been any like major structural changes that have happened to a book after you guys are done with it?

**Lynn:** [00:25:12] Um, yes, there was, there was a change to Cerulean that we suggested.

We didn't really suggest the change to it, but because of our comments, something was added.

**Kirt:** [00:25:24] Okay.

**Lynn:** [00:25:24] That made the book much better, I think. So. I felt real good when I saw that. "

**Kirt:** **As painful as it can be to be the people who are on this side of the teasing, most of us get to experience TJ's work at the same time, on the day the book is released. We get to share in the excitement with others, and I wondered if the beta readers ever missed that feeling.**

**Mia:** [00:21:00]: "Do I ever miss reading just the finished product? No. No. I actually love reading the finished product primarily because I get to go through and go "oh, that bastard didn't pay any attention to my advice" or "what the hell, he added something" because the finished product isn't necessarily what we've, we've read, um, you know, for Cerulean, for example, um, I've been lucky to see the finished product completely changed the start.

So just because a, um, we've seen a book, but you know, once early in the process, it doesn't mean it's the same as the book we see at the end of the process. A lot of it's the

same, but every now and then he's a sneaky bastard and he'll change things and we'll just be like, Whoa. And just as excited as everyone else."

**Kirt: Finally, I asked TJ if he had any favorite types of feedback or comments from his betas...**

**TJ:** [00:10:55]: "YUh, yeah, I do. When they, when they both agree that something doesn't work at all, like when they, when they're both in agreement, a) that makes my job easier, b) I don't have to sit there and be like, okay, which who, who has the better point with this, and c) when they both say something doesn't work.

That means it doesn't work. So I can go in and fix that. And it may seem, it may seem that it's better to get happier comments, but it's really not. Because if somebody, if both people tell you something doesn't work, that means I need to go in and fix it. And it helps to, to push me to make the story better.

So my favorite is when they tell me it sucks."

**Kirt: So there you have it Klunatics. Now you know what it means to be one of TJ's beta readers, the importance of their role in the writing process, and how crucial it is for a writer to have an open and honest relationship with their beta readers. If you have any questions for the beta reader, just ask. Lynn and Mia are both a part of the Klunatics Facebook group, or you can send us an email at [klunaticspodcast@gmail.com](mailto:klunaticspodcast@gmail.com).**

**I'm Kirt Graves. I'll talk to you next week when you'll be hearing some familiar voices. (Look at me. I'm teasing them now. I'm like Tj Klune. What an asshole.)**