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**Episode Name: Scandals, Scoundrels, and Badass Broads, with guest YA author Mackenzi Lee**

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**Transcription by Keffy**

[00:00:00] Literaticast theme music plays.

Jennifer: [00:00:06] Hi, and welcome to the Literaticast. I'm Jennifer Laughran. This show is going to be so packed with goodness I'm actually skipping my usual intro so I can get right into it. My guest today is a YA author. Her new book is *The Gentleman's Guide to Vice and Virtue*. It follows the exploits of a playboy who drinks and sleeps his way across Europe with his best friend who he also just happens to be in love with. It is a laugh out loud funny, big gay romp that reminds me of *Brideshead Revisited* meets *The Hangover*. And I'm so excited to talk with its author, Mackenzi Lee.

[00:00:42] Can you just kind of give us an overview of your path to publication?

Mackenzi: [00:00:45] Oh my gosh. Yeah, it's like my whole life is my path to publication. I was a writer when I was like eight or nine years old in the way everybody is a writer when they're eight or nine years old. I really liked to read but I look back now and I don't think I was a very good reader. I got really scared off by books that were too challenging for me, or too voicy. I liked to read the same books over and over again. I did a lot of audiobooks and mostly I read *Star Wars* novelizations. Those were super my jam when I was ten years old. Which is not to say there's anything wrong with any of that, but I don't think I was a very good reader.

[00:01:24] So when I was sort of required to graduate out of middle grade books into—young adult wasn't really a thing so adult books, I kind of stopped reading and then going along with that, I stopped writing, too. And didn't come back to it until I was in college. I did a history degree. I did a year abroad while I was working on the degree so that I could do research for my thesis and while I was abroad I was traveling a lot, and I was like, what do people do in airports and bus stations and things like that, and started reading again. It was fine.

[00:01:57] And then I started reading books from my childhood again. I found a second-hand copy of *The Goose Girl* by Shannon Hale in a bookstore in the UK and started reading that and I was like, oh my gosh, this is what books used to be. They used to be so fun and wonderful. And so I started reading all these children's books again from when I was a young person and then from there kind of funneled into reading young adult. And at the same time had a professor tell me that my history papers read like novels and I was not allowed to say things like, "Richard the III was really angry," or write dialogue for Henry the V. And so, I decided maybe I needed to look into a different kind of writing.

[00:02:39] So, I got back to the States and finished my thesis and was reading a lot of children's books and then just started writing again. I moved to Boston, I did an MFA at Simmons and wrote a bunch of books that didn't get anywhere. Wrote a book that got me an agent that also didn't get anywhere and then wrote a book as part of my thesis for my MFA which ended up being *This Monstrous Thing*, which is my first book.

Jennifer: [00:03:02] You're a bookseller, too, right?

Mackenzi: [00:03:03] Yeah, I am.

Jennifer: [00:03:04] So, I have a theory. And I don't know, maybe it's just a lie, and my theory is that booksellers are kind of in a unique position in the book industry because they can see things from both a publisher kind of, behind the scenes way, and also from a reader consumer point of view. They're really in both worlds and I think a lot of times people at publishing houses don't know what actual humans on the ground are gravitating towards and that kind of thing. Do you think that that's true?

Mackenzi: [00:03:37] Yeah, I think that's absolutely correct. Especially, I think, in children's and young adult books, as a writer of those books, I work with only adults on these books. I talk to my agent who is an adult, my editor, my publicist, my whole publishing team are all adults. And then to go into the bookstore and have teenagers and young people coming up to me and telling me what they're excited about and what they're reading and seeing what they're picking up. It totally changes your perspective on things.

Jennifer: [00:04:04] Yeah. I feel the same as an agent, actually. I think it just, that, being able to wear that hat is really helpful.

Mackenzi: [00:04:12] It's helpful to remember, too, that at the end of producing these books, you have readers. You talk to readers online when you're an author but as a bookseller you talk to them every day. And you talk to

people who are excited about books and you see that really there is a book for every reader, I guess. And a reader for every book. And yeah, it just, it really brings back the human side to it that I think you kind of miss in publishing when everything is numbers and everything is money and your art is sort of commodified.

Jennifer: [00:04:41] Right. Was there anything unexpected? Something you know now that you have a couple books out that would have really surprised you a few years ago or before you started?

Mackenzi: [00:04:51] Oh gosh, everything. It's all—publishing was such a different beast than writing. And being an author is so different from being a writer for me. I think just the fact that it is so different would surprise me. And also just that it's the sort of thing where when you're standing on the sidelines it's really easy, and even when I'm sort of like between books or between projects and not in the thick of promotion, it's really easy to look at things and say, oh, it doesn't... To not compare yourself and say, this doesn't matter. I understand that it's a business. I understand that my book is a product for somebody. I'm not going to compare myself, I'm just going to be happy about the little milestones and then you, as soon as you see somebody else's book get something, you're like, nope, not happy with my milestones anymore, I want that milestone.

[00:05:38] So, I would say, it definitely brought out my inner competitiveness in a way that I'm still, and probably for the rest of my life will be trying to manage. Yeah, it just, I don't know. Publishing was... my first year after getting a book deal was really really tough on me. And I dealt with pretty severe depression in a way that I hadn't really before in my life.

[00:06:00] Sorry, this got really heavy all of a sudden.

Jennifer: [00:06:01] Oh, no, I mean, I think a lot of people can relate to that and it's good to hear somebody say it.

Mackenzi: [00:06:07] Yeah, I mean, I've talked to a lot of writers who have said the same thing, that it's just, it's such a huge shift in perspective, in the way, I think, too, it's the idea of before as a writer you're always sort of writing what you love and then you kind of throw it out there and see if it sticks. And so, as soon as you get a book deal, suddenly you have an agent on board, you have an editor. You have a publishing team, or even just you have people who read your books and have expectations, and it was... even though my first book was a very, very small book relatively, I just

felt like the tremendous weight of expectation in a way that I really didn't expect to.

Jennifer: [00:06:45] Well, and I think that so many times people think, you know, when they're in their MFA program or they're toiling away in their garret or whatever, that their goal is, I'm going to get published. I'm going to be a New York Times Bestseller, or whatever. And so they think, oh, I've got a contract, now everything is great.

Mackenzi: [00:07:07] Right.

Jennifer: [00:07:07] But it's just not.

Mackenzi: [00:07:10] Yeah. I—

Jennifer: [00:07:11] If anything, you have more problems.

Mackenzi: [00:07:13] Yeah, I kept doing the thing, too, where I would say, as soon as I get an agent, I'm going to feel like a real writer, or I'm going to feel valid, or I'm going to feel successful. And then you get an agent, and it's like, nope, that wasn't enough. I gotta get a book deal. And then you get a book deal, and you're like, nope, not enough. Gotta get whatever the next sort of arbitrary benchmark is. And your metric for success reconfigures sort of the higher you climb. And so, you never end up feeling—that was my experience, anyway, I never end up feeling successful, or I never feel like I'm there. Or like I have reached a goal because you're always looking to the next thing.

[00:07:45] Which is great because it keeps you ambitious and it keeps you hungry but it can also be really damaging to your psyche, I think.

Jennifer: [00:07:51] But speaking of milestones. I mean, Gentleman's Guide has done really well. You've had—

Mackenzi: [00:07:57] It's hit a couple of those milestones, yeah.

Jennifer: [00:08:00] Yeah. I mean, you've had amazing reviews. Five starred reviews in trade publications. Tremendous word of mouth. You were a number one Indie Next pick and you debuted on the New York Times Bestseller List. So that's some milestones.

Mackenzi: [00:08:13] Yeah, it's been a few good things.

Jennifer: [00:08:16] Did you do a preorder campaign or anything like that? Was there anything you attribute this out of the gate success with, or just luck?

Mackenzi: [00:08:27] I think it's always a combination of hustling and luck. This was not a book—I mean, I've had great support from my publisher on this book. They've been so wonderful to work with, but this was not, like, a lead title for Harper. They didn't throw a ton of money behind it. I knew from the beginning that this was not going to be a book they were throwing a ton of money behind and so I just decided I was going to hustle for it. So, when we had a manuscript, I started contacting, because I'm an indie bookseller, I know that—I guess I didn't realize the power of booksellers until I started working in a bookstore and I realized that's really... If you can't get into Target and Walmart, which is such an exclusive club that your publisher really has to pick you for it, I wanted to get in with indies. And I have this great connection that I am an indie bookseller, so that was sort of a great way to open the door.

[00:09:19] But also, I always use this example. The first bookstore I ever worked at, my favorite book in the world is Code Name Verity by Elizabeth Wein and the first—so when I started working at this first bookstore, they'd sold three copies of Code Name Verity in its entire lifetime. It had been out for like a year and a half at that point. And my first month at the bookstore, I sold 40 copies.

[00:09:40] So it just, I always think about that as proof that booksellers hand selling books to people and putting books they're excited about on displays and sort of pushing them on their customers, you can't underestimate the power, I think, of the indie bookseller. So I decided I really wanted to get in with indies. I had a great connection so I just started pitching myself to indie booksellers that I either new or had sort of friend of a friend with and just getting the manuscript out. And again, Harper was really good about when I was like, hey can I have X number of bound manuscript copies to just send to random people. They were like, yeah, that's great! So they were very supportive of all my sort of efforts. And just sort of meeting people and talking to people and forming relationships with people that is not based around, I am an author with a book and so I am at some point going to ask a favor of you. But really just like, connecting with people on a shared love of books and shared love of bookstores.

Jennifer: [00:10:35] That's something that regular authors who are not booksellers can do with their local bookstores, too. I mean, I feel like—

Mackenzi: [00:10:40] Yeah.

Jennifer: [00:10:41] —so many of the books that we recommend, you know, we've met the author. The author's come in and said hello. The author is cool on Twitter or asked us for book recommendations.

Mackenzi: [00:10:52] Yeah, I was going to say, that's a large part of the reason I pick up a lot of books is because the author seems cool or, yeah, the author has come into the store or we had an event. There's a hundred reasons why but really, I think part of it is finding a way to do that without feeling like you're—without... It's a really tricky line because you don't want booksellers to feel like you're only doing this because you're inevitably going to want something from them. You want to form, like, real relationships with people. And I think that's tricky. And as a bookseller, I can always tell when authors are sort of like, schmoozing up to us just because they know that one day they're going to ask us for an event or they're going to ask us to do a preorder campaign or something.

[00:11:33] So, as best you can, the best thing to do, is really to form real relationships beyond the mutual benefit of bookseller and author friendship. I had a lot of booksellers that got behind this book and did things like nominating it for Indie Next. I had a lot of luck just in terms of who reviewed the book. Because, like, trade reviews are great and I don't sort of discount any of those five stars, they all mean so much to me. But I understand that I was tremendously lucky to get readers for this book who understood what I was doing with it. Especially with the narrator of the book is kind of... not abrasive, but he's a very, like he either really wins people over or people really, really can't stand him. He's polarizing, that's more the way to say it.

[00:12:19] But he's polarizing with, like, a lot of intention behind it. And so I was lucky that I got reviewers who understood the polarizing nature of his character and sort of why it was in place and were able to look into his marshmallow interior.

Jennifer: [00:12:33] So, I think that that's. I mean, that's one thing about this book is that, you know, it's described by me and others as over the top big gay romp.

Mackenzi: [00:12:45] Uh-huh.

Jennifer: [00:12:45] Were you concerned at all that you might not be able to go there in terms of your main character's fluid sexuality, rampant bad behavior, general roguishness? Did that concern—were you ever worried about any of that?

Mackenzi: [00:13:02] Yes. I actually started writing this book when I—when I signed my first book deal for This Monstrous Thing, it was for This Monstrous Thing plus untitled book two. Which I quickly learned is like, the greatest blessing and also the greatest curse because it's so—it feels so backwards to be writing a book under contract like that when you sort of

have this open end but you still have everybody involved. You have a publisher, you have an editor, you have an agent, and so I was slaving away on this other book that I should have known much earlier than I did that it was just not working out and it was a very ill-fated book and I was like, prying three word sentences out of myself and it was just so painful and I was so miserable working on this book and so I decided to prove to myself that writing could be fun by working on something that was just for me.

[00:13:57] And so, I started working on the side on this ridiculous adventure novel. I really, really love anything sort of old-school historical adventure, whether it's a book or a movie, that's very much my aesthetic, if you will. So, I started working on this side-project. Sincerely thinking I would be the only one who would ever read it, which is why scenes like the streaking through Versailles scene ended up in the book. I was like, my rule was like, nothing is too ridiculous, there is no joke that's too weird, I just want you to write everything you love in one book. And also why it also just like wraps its arms around every adventure novel trope. And why it's sort of gleefully anachronistic in points.

[00:14:38] And so I was sort of working on this on the side when I hit my sort of critical point with the other ill-fated book, when I was like, I either have to redo this from the ground up or I gotta bail. And I chose to bail and this was sort of the only other thing I had going at the time so I sort of tentatively threw it out to my agent with like, I got this thing. I don't know if this is anything and she was really great about pushing me to sort of see if that could be my second book. And it ended up, obviously, spoiler alert, ended up being the second book.

[00:15:08] So I was lucky that I wrote a lot of it thinking nobody was ever going to read it and I wrote a lot of it in a vacuum, which is why I think it turned out kind of the way it did. So much of it just feels like, it felt like a book for me. And so I wasn't worried so much about Monty's abrasiveness when I was working on it. I definitely was once—I try not to read like Goodreads or Amazon reviews or anything. But once, sort of like tentative early reviews, not trade reviews, I was like, oh, this is shocking to me that people don't like this character because he is like, he is so close to my heart and also the least flattering thing I can say about myself, he is so similar to me. And so, it's a little bit. It feels a little bit like getting judged by your readers when you're like, here's the character who's most like me and they're like, ugh, he's the worst!

[00:15:59] So it was honestly a little bit surprising to me when people were reacting negatively to Monty. I'm less worried about it now because I've sort of acclimatized to the idea that people are either going to love

him or hate him. And the people who love him love him in the way I do. And really understand it and I think there are people who relate and the people who find Monty too polarizing, I'm like, this is just. It's just not a book for you and that's fine, because not every book is going to be for every reader.

Jennifer: [00:16:27] Well, I loved him and I don't even see him as being abrasive at all, so I guess that speaks to me.

Mackenzi: [00:16:32] [crosstalk] either, and it was frankly shocking to me when people would say that, because I was like, but he's such a love. Like, he's a little, he's dumpster fire, but he's such a sad dumpster fire.

Jennifer: [00:16:47] I mean, maybe it's because I'm a Slytherin, I like him. I don't know.

Mackenzi: [00:16:50] Possibly.

Jennifer: [00:16:50] So, obviously you're a history person. You have a degree. You love historical stuff. How—is there a way that you tackle historical research? Do you have favorite resources? And obviously, you are a little bit anachronistic, when do you make the choice to veer off the historical record to suit your story better?

Mackenzi: [00:17:11] Yeah, I don't remember who it was. Somebody said, "gleefully anachronistic," some review did. And I was like, yep, that's exactly what it is.

[00:17:19] So, in terms of research, I always start—I generally in the past have written about time periods that I don't know anything about. So, in spite of having a history degree, my specialization in my undergrad was on England during the Wars of the Roses, which is like 1400s. And so, I didn't know anything about 1700s Europe going in. And so it's always really, really daunting standing at the start of a time period you don't know anything about and I have to remind myself with every book, this is always this daunting and you always feel this dumb at the start and you always get panicked about what you don't know you don't know kind of a thing?

[00:17:56] So I always start with reading other historical fiction set in the time period. And I have to do this before I start writing, or else once I start writing I will get jealous of other people's skills and also try and adopt their voice as I'm writing. So I have to read historical fiction before I start writing. But I think reading other historical fiction set in the time period gives you the human side of it. It's a great easy access point. It doesn't feel quite as scary as going in cold to non-fiction texts. And yeah,



it does give you sort of a human side. It gives you details you won't get when you're reading overviews of the time period.

[00:18:31] So I always start with historical fiction and then from there move to the sort of broader look at what's going on in the time period. I always read primary sources if I can. I read a ton of journals and letters home and sort of first-hand accounts from tourists in the 1700s as part of this book, which was all tremendously helpful and so much of the details ended up in the book because it wasn't just—it wasn't just a look at what the places were like at the time. It was a look at what English people were observing, specifically, as they're abroad about the places they're going and what feels foreign to them, and what feels strange and what they don't like, and things like that.

[00:19:10] So I always do sort of that, then, and move into nonfiction. And then the biggest thing with the historical fiction is you just kind of have to start before you're ready and understand that you don't know everything. You're going to run into things on every page that you're like, oh crap, did they have, like how do they fasten their dresses and do you have window shutters and how—what do door latches look like? Random things like that. And so you just have to sort of be prepared that you're going to be stopping and starting a lot when you write.

[00:19:37] And then when I revise, I always revise with the Merriam-Webster tab open on my computer, and you have to check first usage of every word just obsessively. Which is a pain. But that's sort of what you sign up for, so, that's sort of an overview of my research process.

[00:19:55] In terms of anachronisms, I always think of it as, if they're—so all of my books, so far, have been historical fantasies. The first one is sort of a far more fantasy-based historical where *Gentleman's Guide* is more of a season-to-taste fantasy element. So I always try to think of it as, how do you say it? If there are things in the fantasy elements that would conceivably adjust real history then adjust it, but if there's things that wouldn't be adjusted by your fantastical elements then they need to stay the same. So, there are cyborgs in my first book, and that obviously would adjust a lot of things and affect a lot of things about this alternate 1818 Geneva. But it's not going to change the fact that, "okay" was not a word at the time. Or that women weren't using pants and things like that.

[00:20:50] So that's how I try and think about it. In terms of *Gentleman's Guide*, I did want it to be a historical novel that reads quite contemporary and that has a lot of crossover with contemporary readers because I feel like there's this sort of unfair idea about historical fiction that it's really

difficult and really isolating and that modern readers can't really relate to it and people think it's boring for that reason.

[00:21:12] So I wanted—I thought a lot about sort of, wanting characters that have questions and issues and struggles that are relatable to modern readers and then as a result of that, some things sort of adjusted along the way. I wanted them to feel familiar. I wanted them to feel like people you would know but also people of their time period. So, it's a hard line to walk. It's not a line that I ever feel like I get better at walking. It's different for every book—

Jennifer: [00:21:41] So your Twitter often contains threads of Bygone Badass Broads, stories of historical ladies that are so awesome, and best of all, true. And a birdy told me that this is going to be a book. Congratulations.

Mackenzi: [00:21:57] Thank you.

Jennifer: [00:21:58] Will you give us one of these stories?

Mackenzi: [00:22:02] Right now, off the top of my head?

Jennifer: [00:22:03] Yeah.

Mackenzi: [00:22:04] Oh my God.

Jennifer: [00:22:04] In fairness, I warned you.

Mackenzi: [00:22:06] You did warn me, but I... it's not fair. I looked at the questions and was like, yeah I can't totally do this and then forgot to actually do any prep work for them. Um.

Jennifer: [00:22:17] Well, we can skip if you don't want to.

Mackenzi: [00:22:17] No no no, I'm going to do it. I'm going to do it. Can I talk a little bit about the series to get myself warmed up for it?

Jennifer: [00:22:21] Yeah, totally.

Mackenzi: [00:22:22] So the series started, actually from a lot of the same place that Gentleman's Guide came from, which was a frustration with the fact that a lot of historical narratives, both fiction and non-fiction are very homogenously about white, straight, cis men. And especially when I was in undergrad, I got really frustrated by the fact that if I wanted to learn about women in history, I had to take a special class. Or if I wanted to learn about minorities in history, you have to take a specialized class. Whereas when you do just sort of the general overviews and the

mainstream classes, it would all be about straight white men, and then the idea was women and minorities were so busy being oppressed that they didn't have time to make any history.

[00:23:05] And it was the sort of thing that I was like, in my bones, I know this is wrong. But I sort of drank the kool-aid the whole time I was in undergrad. And I was just like, okay, I guess this is just how it is. And then, when I started branching out on my own and doing more research on my own, found all these stories of women, about queer people, about people of colors in sort of modern history that just get ignored. And it was so frustrating to me. And so this was like, this project is my small way of trying to, I don't know, trying to paper over that a little bit or do what I can to bring less mainstream narratives to more mainstream history.

[00:23:45] So I'm thrilled people have responded to it super well.

Jennifer: [00:23:48] Oh, yeah.

Mackenzi: [00:23:50] So, if I tell you a story right now can I do one I've already done? Is that okay.

Jennifer: [00:23:54] Sure.

Mackenzi: [00:23:54] Okay. So, I wasn't sure if I had to do someone—

Jennifer: [00:23:58] I want you to research a brand new person that you've never thought about before—

Mackenzi: [00:24:02] Hold on, let me pull out the computer here.

Jennifer: [00:24:02] And live, on air...

Mackenzi: [00:24:05] Well, I was trying to think, too, who's in the book that's not, that I haven't done on Twitter. Because the book is like 60/40 old content and then new content. So I was like, is there someone in the book that I haven't?

Jennifer: [00:24:15] It could even be some—because you know what? A lot of people read the Twitter but a lot of my listeners probably don't. They don't know yet.

Mackenzi: [00:24:22] That's a good point. This might be an introduction. Okay, so I'm just going to do my favorite go-to woman which most people have heard me talk about. And in spite of her being my favorite go-to woman, I still haven't totally learned how to pronounce her name, which I really

should work on. Because she's French and I don't have a lot of French training. So. The only name we actually know her by is La Maupin which was her stage name as a performer in France. So she was this woman in the 1600s, her sort of name that she has come to be known by, by history is Julie d'Aubigny, but it's, again, we kind of think this is her name but we don't totally know. But mostly I call her Julie.

[00:25:07] So, Julie was born in the 1600s in France to a fencing instructor. He trained page boys for the palace or something like that, and so he ended up raising her as a boy and raising her with all these boy skills including fencing, and she was a really, really good fencer. She was also a little bit of a rebellious tomboy and wanted to get it on with various gentlemen that her father would step in the way of. So she decided that the only person she could sleep with without him getting in the way was his boss and so she took up with his boss and he was like, hmm, we should probably get you married.

[00:25:41] She was not into that so she ran away from home to become a performing fencing person, performing fencer. Wow, that was tough. So she found this other guy and they became this fencing duo that traveled all over France and do fencing demonstrations. And she was so good with a sword that there was—and she would dress up as a boy while she would do it, and there was some... it was called into question that she was actually a woman because she was so good at fencing and that was a traditionally male thing. So one time while she was performing, this guy was like heckling her and being like, oh you can't really be a woman, you're too good. And so to prove that she actually was a woman, she flashed him her boobs. Which was like, proof.

[00:26:17] So while they were traveling she ended up falling in love with this girl in a village that went through and when the girl's parents fell out that their daughter was getting it on with this lady fencer they sent her to a convent as, like, we will nip this lesbianism in the bud. But Julie, being a woman decided she was going to follow her love to the convent. So she also took the veil. They became nuns together and then ended up, she liberated her lover from this convent. They ended up burning the convent down on their way out the door and I'm not totally sure why that needed to happen but it happened.

[00:26:50] So they had a tumultuous affair. Julie got bored because she got bored all the time in her life, so then she left her lover to become an opera singer and she was one of the first contra-altos to perform in France / in Europe at the time and she was a big star, which is where her stage name La Maupin comes from.

[00:27:09] But just continued to raise hell all over France and just be this notorious gambler, dueler, sometimes dressed as a lady, sometimes dressed as a man. She eventually got banished from France because she was fighting too many duels and killed too many men in duels so she ended up taking up with the Elector of Bavaria and he was not paying her enough attention so she stabbed herself on stage to try and get his attention. And he was like, we should probably just be friends. And so she just had this crazy, wild life. And she's one of those people that I always bring up as an example, of like, queer people existed in history pre-Rent. And not only did they exist, many of them were able to live out and proud and nobody was persecuting them for that. And so, I think when we study history we sort of forget the individual lived experience. And when we talk about being queer today, we think of it so much in terms of like, where are you and where are you living and what's your community like, and who are your parents and what's your socio-economic station and different things like that when we don't think about that in history. We tend to talk about it all in broader terms and say, like, everybody who was queer was persecuted. And everybody who was queer couldn't be anything more than a tragic subplot in a BBC period drama.

[00:28:22] So, she's one of those great people who disproves that idea because she was so open about her sexuality and so openly bisexual and people were less upset about the fact that she was bisexual and more upset about the fact that she was making out with all the women they wanted to be making out with. So—

Jennifer: [00:28:37] A-mazing. I'm literally... had my mouth open during that entire story.

Mackenzi: [00:28:41] I was going to say, as I started telling that story, I was like, oh, she's not like the most virtuous example.

Jennifer: [00:28:46] No! Who wants that?

Mackenzi: [00:28:47] She was definitely a hell-raiser.

Jennifer: [00:28:48] I mean, I was gonna say, if you were gonna ask me, I would have probably said maybe we should talk about Ursula Nordstrom because this is a children's book podcast.

Mackenzi: [00:28:58] We could still talk about Ursula Nordstrom, who is like, my guiding light in everything I do. I love Ursula Nordstrom so much.

Jennifer: [00:29:05] Well, I'm going to just make everybody read Dear Genius. That would be a good place to start.

Mackenzi: [00:29:09] As they should. I think all the time about—so, Ursula Nordstrom, for your listeners who don't know, was a children's book editor who really is responsible for children's books looking the way they do now and also for so many of the best-selling children's books of all time, including Marice Sendak's books. And she was his editor and she sort of discovered him. And I love Maurice Sendak. And she has—they corresponded. She corresponded with everybody because of the time period and they have such beautiful correspondences and I love reading their letters. She's so, like, tough but encouraging. There's some letter he wrote to her right before he started working on Wild Things where he was clearly having a rough go and really, like, feeling creatively stopped and he says something about, like, if I can't write like Tolstoy, what's the point of writing at all? And she replies to him and says, you might not be Tolstoy, but Tolstoy wasn't Sendak, either. And I try and think about that every time I get sort of like, depressed about my own writing and look at other writers and I'm like, if I can't write like them, what's the point of writing at all. And I always think about that. Everybody has their own unique voice. And you might not be like the writers you admire but you are like yourself, and your voice is important and unique in its own way.

[00:30:16] So, I think about Ursula all the time. She's one of my patron saints.

Jennifer: [00:30:19] Me too. Have you seen her desk in Harper?

Mackenzi: [00:30:23] I have. I have one of my most treasured photos of myself is a picture sitting at her desk that I—yeah, I just feel like it's the little shrine there in the Harper office that I need to go pray to every time I go.

Jennifer: [00:30:35] Totally. So, okay. So back to books, I guess.

Mackenzi: [00:30:38] Yes.

Jennifer: [00:30:40] I know that Bygone Badass Broads is going to be a book, but I've seen a couple of other book deals announced, too. You've got a sequel to Gentleman's Guide and Semper Augustus. Do you want to give us a little tiny scoop on those?

Mackenzi: [00:30:51] Sure. So, the sequel to Gentleman's Guide is called The Lady's Guide to Petticoats and Piracy. It is about, well, it is narrated by / follows the continuing adventures of Felicity who is Monty's younger sister, who is sort of a side character that becomes one of the leading trio in Gentleman's Guide and we just had so many positive reactions to her that she was always a character that I really liked, but I didn't expect to get the reaction to her that we did, which is... We, I'm talking like

Gollum. We meaning like, my editor and I. And so there was such an overwhelmingly positive response to Felicity and from the start people were calling for a Felicity book, which made me really happy and is not something I thought about doing until my editor sort of nudged me and was like, so, is this something you'd want to write?

[00:31:42] So yeah, it's a book that is narrated by Felicity, follows her adventures. It's a little bit—I'm still trying to figure out how to talk about it without spoiling the end of Gentleman's Guide and so I've generally just been saying it's about three very different women from different corners of Europe at the time who come together to do piracy and science. So it's a pirate science girl gang.

Jennifer: [00:32:07] There you go.

Mackenzi: [00:32:07] With Felicity as the narrator. So, hopefully if I can get my act together that will come out next year. And then my other book that is coming out is called Semper Augustus. Again, it will hopefully come out in 2019, it is set in the 1630s in Holland during the height of the Dutch tulip mania, which is one of those strange pockets of history that I am so fascinated with and don't understand why everybody doesn't talk about it all the time.

[00:32:32] So it was this brief period—it's sort of like there was a long build-up to it and then this very intense peak of it where the Dutch had just become an independent nation—Holland had just, The Netherlands had just become an independent nation from Spain. They were sort of like kicking ass at trade all over the world and so there was a middle class for the first time ever. People had a disposable income for the first time ever and they just didn't know what to do with it. And so they started buying tulip bulbs. And tulips were, in spite of being a national symbol of Holland now, tulips were pretty new to the Netherlands at the time. And it was sort of this flower that represented wealth and decadence because it's totally ornamental. There's no practical application for tulips. You can't eat them or use them as medicine or anything.

[00:33:17] But people started buying tulips like crazy to the point that this economic bubble was created around tulip bulbs to the point that the time the book is set, which is in 1637, you could buy a single tulip bulb for the price of a house in Amsterdam. And tulip bulbs were trading hands multiple times every day and there was all this speculation around it and then virtually overnight the entire market just collapsed.

[00:33:44] And it's such an interesting, weird little pocket of history. So the book is set sort of in those final months of the tulip mania and is

about a pair of siblings who are trying to run a con to sell a tulip bulb for much more than it's worth.

Jennifer: [00:33:59] Last two things. First of all, do you have any awesome book to recommend this week?

Mackenzi: [00:34:08] Awesome book to recommend. I actually just finished reading an incredibly awesome book for a blurb that I am just kind of obsessed with and want to throw at everybody's faces, but it's not out yet. And that's one of the perils of being both an author and a bookseller is you often get to read books before they're out. And then it's very difficult because you just want to talk about them and you want to sell them, but they're just not there yet. I've had customers come through the store and they ask me for something. And I'm like, I have the perfect book for you. Can you come back in six to eight months when it is released.

[00:34:38] So, I just finished reading *Blood Water Paint* by Joy McCullough. Oh no... yeah. I think it's *Blood Water Paint*. And I have it on the floor. It's three words and I now can't remember what order they go in. But the author's name is Joy McCullough, it's her debut novel. It is set in the 1600s, I think, in Rome. And it's about a real woman. Her name was Artemisia, and she was a painter at the time in this sort of very boy's club of Roman art history. It's a true story about her, about her work as a painter, and then also sort of a, how do I say this without spoiling it, a trial that sort of springs up around her.

Jennifer: [00:35:17] No, I know! Oh! I read about her, and I was like, when will there be a YA book about this?

Mackenzi: [00:35:22] Oh my gosh. It is—this is the book. Not only is this like, a book about her. This is the book about her. It's just beautiful, and there's so many. I was originally, like, taking pictures of every line that I loved and then I was like, I'm going to fill up my entire phone memory because it's just so beautiful, and it's so feminist and really goes back to this sort of idea that I think I go back to with all historical fiction. Which is the idea that, like, the world changes and we talk about different things and we wear different clothes and we have different politics, but really, like, people don't ever really change. And I love so much about history and historical fiction is when you can look back and see yourself and sort of see bridges and see things that people are still worried about reflected in history. And that's so much of why I loved this book because so much of it is so relatable to a modern reader but is still really, really rooted in the 1600s.



[00:36:15] And it's just so, like, you can't miss it kind of feminism. It's just so unapologetically feminist which I just really, really love in a book. This book is so beautiful. I can't wait till it's out. I think it's out in March. And I just really just want to shout at everybody about it because it was so good.

Jennifer: [00:36:30] Okay, I'm in. I need to read it right now. So now, every week. I ask my guest what they are obsessed with this week. But you might have just told me what you are obsessed with.

Mackenzi: [00:36:42] I mean, that was definitely one. I can tell you—does it have to be a bookish obsession, or?

Jennifer: [00:36:45] No!

Mackenzi: [00:36:45] Okay.

Jennifer: [00:36:46] And as a matter of fact, I'll start with mine. So this is furthest—not furthest. It is pretty far from being bookish. I am just wrapping up watching the first season of *Glow* on Netflix. That is a show about the *Gorgeous Ladies of Wrestling*, which was a show in the '80s. Featuring gorgeous ladies wrestling.

Mackenzi: [00:37:07] Sure.

Jennifer: [00:37:07] And this is a fictional take on how that started as done by the same team that did *Orange is the New Black*. Here's the thing. I don't love it. Like, I don't like the main character. Which is actually the same problem I have with *Orange is the New Black*. The ensemble side characters are so great—

Mackenzi: [00:37:27] Yeah.

Jennifer: [00:37:27] And then the main character is so annoying. So I don't love it, but I'm super into it. Like, I just watched a documentary about the real *Glow* which is also called *Glow*. And it's also on Netflix.

Mackenzi: [00:37:38] That's not confusing.

Jennifer: [00:37:39] Yeah. But you could tell, because it's very janky, like, 1990s-looking type fit. It's just not as slick looking, so when you're looking through Netflix for *Glow*, you'll notice which one was the documentary. But that follows the formation of the original group, so you can see which characters they riffed off for the TV show, how it actually all came together. Anyway, I've never followed wrestling but now I feel like I might start. Like, Nicole at the bookstore is super into wrestling and

she's telling me all these wrestling facts and now I'm like, becoming a wrestling fan. That is what I'm obsessed with this week.

Mackenzi: [00:38:18] Wow. That's quite a testament to a show if it can make you a wrestling fan.

Jennifer: [00:38:23] I know.

Mackenzi: [00:38:23] So the thing I'm obsessed with this week is also a TV show, which is, I was kind of worried when you started talking that you were going to steal my obsession thing.

Jennifer: [00:38:33] Oh.

Mackenzi: [00:38:34] But it's not, thankfully. So, my show that I'm obsessed with this week is The Bold Type. I am not a new TV watcher, I will ad. I am the kind of person who watches the same things over and over and over again. I don't—I'm very, like, high energy and high anxiety and so I don't sit still very well. So I don't like new TV, because I have to sit still and devote the entirety of my attention to it and I have a hard time with that.

[00:38:58] So when I start a new TV show, it is a momentous occasion and when I stick with a new TV show, it is an even more momentous occasion. And I started watching The Bold Type this week, which is a show on Freeform, I think it's three or four episodes in, now. I started watching it thinking, after seeing billboards for it all over Boston. Thinking it was just going to be like brain candy. I really like—I hate the word guilty pleasure—so just one of my pleasure movies is Devil Wears Prada, and I thought this was going to be like the same kind of... scratch the same kind of itch as Devil Wears Prada, where it's just kind of like, fashion porn that I just want to go on a shopping spree after seeing it. And it's all about, like, bitchy back biting in a fashion magazine.

[00:39:40] And I definitely do want to redo my own wardrobe every time I watch it because the clothes are spectacular. But what it ended up being instead is this, again, very unapologetically feminist show about three women, three sort of 20-somethings. Their relationship with each other, their relationship with their jobs, it's very, like, frank about sex. It's very sex positive. It talks about fluid sexuality. All these things that I feel like get talked about a lot by Millennials on the internet and that is sort of thing I am having conversations about and things I hear my peers having conversations about but don't really get acknowledged in media and television. And so, the fact that they're talking about things, and the last episode I watched had a plotline about harassment on the internet and women getting rape threats and death threats on the internet

because they called things out for being sexist. And I was like, this is amazing. And this is some of the most current and relatable TV. And it's all centered around the relationships between women.

[00:40:40] And it's really smart how it subverts a lot of tropes, in that there's a boss character who's played by Melora Hardin, who you think is going to be sort of like the Meryl Streep character, that's like the really mean dragon lady boss and ends up being a very tough boss but also someone who is very encouraging to her employees and very encouraging of these young women in their careers and fashion.

[00:40:59] And so, just, it does that over and over, where it takes a trope you think you've seen a hundred times before and it still very much plays into that trope but also just tips it on its head just slightly. And I love it. I'm so into this show, and I just want everybody to watch it because I want it to keep going forever. So, it's in that phase, too, where it's like four episodes in and so I'm so panicked it's going to get canceled. And I'm like, we all to watch this. We all have to show everyone we love this show.

Jennifer: [00:41:26] Well, awesome. I'm in. I'll watch it. So, Mackenzi, I need to stop talking to you because we're so over time. But this was a joy.

Mackenzi: [00:41:35] I was going to say, that's okay, I said um and stuttered so many times that when you cut all of those out it's going to be just the right amount of time.

Jennifer: [00:41:41] You know, to be honest, I'm probably not going to cut all those out. Because that's a lot to cut out.

Mackenzi: [00:41:45] That is a lot to cut out. Yeah.

[00:41:48] Literaticast theme music plays.

Jennifer: [00:41:48] But anyway, it was such a pleasure. Thank you so much for joining me.

Mackenzi: [00:41:51] So nice to talk to you. I'm so happy to be on.

Jennifer: [00:41:54] Many thanks to Mackenzi Lee for joining me, and thanks to all you listeners who have been so wonderful and said kinds words about the podcast. As a reminder, there is a Patreon. If you give a buck, you get a chance to win books as well as the opportunity to ask questions of our guests, and more. You can find it at [Patreon.com/literaticast](https://Patreon.com/literaticast).

[00:42:14] Thanks so much for joining me and see you next time.