

Episode 3.9 Dungeons & Dragons & Feminism

November 20, 2018

Hannah (Host):

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[Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. And I absolutely just spoken to this microphone for five minutes before realizing that I hadn't pressed record. So, hey, coming to you today with that late November energy. I have got to tell you my friends, I am not a fan of the month of November. It always just really seems to, to take it out of me. This has been actually a really fun November between Van Pod Fest, and the launch of Refuse, and you know, a bunch of other things, friends' birthdays and, and lots of great things have happened this month. And as you can probably hear from the sound of my voice, I am sick and have been sick pretty much solidly for the entire month, because I find November exhausting. It's a combination of the time of year, just where it's positioned within the semester. March feels the same way. The third month of the semester is always pretty exhausting. November is also hard for me personally. It's the anniversary of my mom's death, so that always takes a toll. And it's such a dark month, it just the, 4:30 with daylight savings, we start getting those 4:30 PM sundowns, and oh boy, do they take it out of me. Way back in August I did a month-by-month tarot reading for myself about the academic year. Just sort of basically using the cards to write down things to remind myself of for each month. And my reminder for myself in November was all about sustainability. I wrote "stay focused, stay grounded and remember that a lasting fire is started slowly and sustained by a steady supply of fuel. Keep fueling this month. Rest, good food, silly time with friends and plenty of strong boundaries." And I've been working on that this month. This really has been what I've been focusing on, recognizing that that some parts of the month will be really high energy and really high output, and that as a result I needed to take more downtime and recognize that there will be days where I just had to tap out and be in bed with cats all day. There has been more of that. There's been more productivity, and as a natural balance of that more time in bed with my cats, which I actually think I'm getting better at. I think I'm getting better at figuring out those balances and figuring out what a kind of slow burn sustainability looks like for me personally, and what I'm going to talk about today is kind of a piece of that. I'm going to talk about one of the hobbies that I've picked up in the past couple of years that brings me a huge amount of joy, and pleasure, and that is really part of, for me, having a sustainable, joyous life and that hobby is Dungeons and Dragons. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

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Hannah (Host):

[03:19](#)

So let me start with a little backstory about my personal relationship with Dungeons and Dragons and role playing games in general, because from, from what I've read, from what I know of research and have heard from other women, I think it's fairly typical. And that is that as a teenager I would have been the absolute target audience for so many forms of deep nerd culture, for comic books, for role playing games, and I dipped my toes into them but I didn't end up participating really because of the intense experience I had that those weren't things for me, that they weren't cultures that welcomed me or that particularly wanted me. And, and that extends from, you know, the lack of being able to find anything like representation in the comic books that I was reading, to the way that games like Dungeons and Dragons were a highly specialized and really, sort of, difficult to, to dabble in kind of activity. Like you needed to buy this huge hardcover book, and these dice, and these mini figurines, and these maps, and you needed to have somebody who already knew how to Dungeon Master. And in order to do that, you needed to somehow find people who were already playing, and since most of the people who were already playing were dudes, you need to somehow convince those guys to like let you play with them. And if they did, you had to suffer through the sort of, you know, gendered dynamics in which so many of those games engaged. And it was just, it was just all so off-putting, which is really a shame because in my heart, I, I think I'm actually just a huge fantasy nerd who has been striving for years to find forms of fantasy that will let me in. Which is why I'm so freaking obsessed with N. K. Jemisin's work, because actually getting to participate in this like huge, rich, detailed, high fantasy world that has like women of color, non-binary characters and queers at the center has been like, just for me, a uniquely joyful experience.

So, so I didn't play Dungeons and Dragons in my youth, I was aware of it, but I started playing for the first time at the ripe old age of, I guess, 32 when I moved to Vancouver. I had started to, to play a different role playing game in Edmonton with a delightful group of friends, my friends Brent, and Alex, and Trevor (erstwhile tech support of if a different podcasts that I make) and our friend Michone, who is our, who is our game master. And you know, we played maybe half a dozen times. We were playing a game called Numenera and it was an absolute riot. It was a really, really, it was just so fun to sit down with this group of people and basically make up fun stories together while eating snacks. And the way that Michone ran that game was very much, sort of, collaborative storytelling, and that's we, I think we all really enjoyed that aspect of it. And when I moved to Vancouver, I found out, I started seeing a lot

more of my friend Marshall, who I did my masters with, and then we ended up living in different cities, but he lives here and so obviously we started hanging out more living in the same city will do that for a friendship. And Marshall plays Dungeons and Dragons quite a lot. At the time he had three or four groups going that he was, he was the Dungeon Master of all of them, and he invited me to join in one of the groups. And so I started off with this group that had already been playing for some time, and I was a complete newbie. And it really, with a different group of people could have been such an alienating experience. It really could have been. But for a couple of reasons it wasn't, it was an incredible experience. One of those reasons is for sure the fact that everybody in this group was gay, or a woman, or both. And that meant that a lot of the. Sort of, like gross gendered fantasy tropes that put me off, historically, from things like Dungeons and Dragons just, just weren't present. Nobody was interested in playing that way. Nobody was interested in making their characters like that. The other players were really welcoming and really patient, and there was very little sense that people were playing to win or to prove anything. And then above all else, Marshall just really modeled such a different approach to bringing somebody into the world of this game than anything I had experienced before, that where previously I had experienced Dungeons and Dragons as something with a lot of gatekeeping around it, you know, because it's a thing that he loves he really wanted to, to open it up and to make it available to me and to figure out how to make it something that I could also take pleasure in. And so that feeling of, of being invited in rather than having to prove myself in order to earn the right really, really shifted my relationship to it. And I think that's the key for so many of us, for, for getting to participate in cultures that maybe that we haven't felt were for us in the past, or the have deliberately been not for for us, is that when some of us, and by us here, I mean us in all kinds of ways, like women, non-binary folks, people of color, queers, you know, the cultures that we've been kept out of. When a few of us start to make it into those cultures, we then can use our presence there to open it up to lots of other people. And that's really what I experienced in this very small way.

The other thing that made it feel like something that, that maybe, could be for me is the fact that while I hadn't played before, I had been listening to a Dungeons and Dragons podcast for some time at that point. The podcast in question is *The Adventure Zone*, which is a podcast that I am deeply emotionally invested in. I'm speaking specifically here to the Balance Arc, which is the first campaign that they played as part of *The Adventure Zone*. The podcast still exists, they're playing a

different role playing game now, one called Monster of the Week, and you know, different characters, different story. That original Balance Arc is a massively popular cultural product, let's say, with a huge fandom. And that fandom is like, is super, super diverse, which is really interesting considering that the people who *make The Adventure Zone* are four white dudes from West Virginia, four straight white dudes from West Virginia. But something that they modeled as being possible and how you can tell stories in Dungeons and Dragons is, is that you can make those stories exactly as diverse and inclusive as you want to, because nothing about the game demands that you participate in exhausting and exhausted fantasy tropes. You know, goblins don't have to be anti-Semitic caricatures and women do not have to wear fur bikinis. Like, it's just, none of that's actually required and none of it's really built into, at least into the fifth edition of the game, which is the one that they play in *The Adventure Zone*, and the one that now I play. And so I already had, you know, not only maybe a bit of a sense of the rules and a bit of the sense of the gameplay and how it worked from listening to this, but also a sense of how the game could be used to tell particular kinds of stories, and that's what excited me about getting to start playing in Vancouver. And that's really what I felt like I got out of the campaign that, that Marshall moved us through over the past two years. That campaign is done now. We completed it. My, my character, my beloved Tiedfling wizard tragically died at the end and we've disbanded that particular group. But in the process, Marshall was telling me that he really missed playing because as an experience Dungeon Master, people always want him to DM. For those of you who don't know because probably a bunch of you don't play Dungeons and Dragons. The Dungeon Master is the person who basically, who creates the world, who tells the story, who plays all of the other characters. So all of the enemies that you fight and all of the random people that you encounter, who tells you what's going on, and who sets the difficulty of the various tasks that you're undertaking. You know, so your Dungeon Master will tell you, you know, "you come across a cave and you want to sneak into it. Okay, roll for stealth," make a stealth roll. And the Dungeon Master decides in their head how difficult it will be to be stealthy in this situation. And so they know what number you need to beat when you roll the dice to succeed or fail, and then they have to tell you what happens depending on the situation. I mean, that's very, sort of, small example, but essentially they're sort of running the story and setting up scenarios in which you get to respond as a, as a character who's playing. So it's a, it's a complex skill. You have to keep a lot of things going in your head at the same time. You have to be playing out a lot of

scenarios. You have to remember a lot of rules and a lot of details and a lot of variables. It's hard to do because Dungeons and Dragons is a, as you know, a rule and detail intensive activity, and I think when you're somebody who knows how to DM, you will very often end up having to play that role. And so Marshall was saying that he, that he missed just going to be a player, just getting to be, you know, an individual character, making decisions in different scenarios and seeing how they played out. And so I told him that I would be interested in learning how to Dungeon Master and maybe a month ago I got a small group of friends together, none of whom have ever played before, and then also Marshall, who has obviously played before a lot, and started DMing my first campaign. So it's my friends, Holly, Kate, and Nancy, and Darin, and Marshall, and then me as all of the other characters. I'm using a, sort of, prefab introductory adventure that came out with the fifth edition that is designed to teach new players how to play the game as well as to teach new Dungeon Masters how to Dungeon Master. And then Marshall is also there on hand as a incredible resource of knowledge about all of the rules and how to, how to play out different scenarios. And I'm, and I'm getting to learn to do this thing that that for me in the past really represented a kind of culture that wasn't for me, that was really explicitly gate kept from me, and that now I really get to participate in and learn about and really indulge in. And end at the same time, I also get to use that experience of learning to be a Dungeon Master as an opportunity to bring three new friends into this world and to introduce them to the game in a way that can also be pleasurable and fun, rather than scary or intimidating, or you know, judgmental or, or whatever all of this baggage so many of us have attached to these kinds of activities is. And it's just bringing me so much joy. It is just so fun. I just love telling stories with my friends. I love getting to spend 10 minutes pretending to be a wolf who somebody has magically given the ability to talk and getting to have a pretend conversation as a wolf. It's just an adult version of playing make believe and it's really, really delightful. It's a really delightful way to pass an evening with a bunch of friends is to sit around together and eat snacks and make up stories together. And I'm really, really grateful that it's a part of my life now.

And I'm really delighted that it's transforming in general as a culture, such that it is becoming more available to lots and lots of people. So I'm going to link to this really interesting piece published earlier this year on *The Mary Sue* about the role of women in the renaissance of Dungeons and Dragons. In 2017 Dungeons and Dragons had its biggest year ever. It's sort of had a, sort of, massive rebirth and in the article the author Vivian

Kane accounts in really interesting ways for why that might be. And she links together the way that the fifth edition, I mean they've rewritten the fifth edition to make it more playable, more streamlined, to make it more driven by storytelling and less driven by rules. They've also made interesting changes, like they revamped the art direction around the player's guide, so that when you look at the way characters are represented, there's a wider variety of, sort of, gender performance. There's just greater diversity even within the fantasy world, you see very few fur bikinis in the fifth edition. And then at the same time, platforms like YouTube and Twitch let people actually watch other people playing Dungeons and Dragons, and so it takes what used to be a thing that happened in basements, and so it could be really hard to access if you didn't know anybody who played, and turns it into something that people all over the world can watch and can see people like them playing, and then start to imagine that, that we also get to participate in this thing. Anyway, I'll, I'll link to the article. It's really interesting. You know, I'll probably link to some other stuff too. But I do want to say if, if you are somebody who this has felt like it's something you would like to do but you have felt intimidated by it, I'm gonna go ahead and say that you should give it a try, because it's really fun. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] You know, who else is really fun? Yeah, you know it. It's Kaarina. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Kaarina:

[18:28](#)

Hello and welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self Care Corner. So two things happen this week. Number one, it was one of those cold, wet days where you can't possibly be wearing the right clothing because who has a coat that is both warm enough and waterproof enough? Rant aside, I got to campus for a full day of work and I was not warm. I was cold and it was not getting any better. So I went to the university bookstore and bought myself a sweater and wore it all day and I haven't taken it off since except to shower. The second thing that happened this week is I sent a message to my dear friend Abin, I mean Beaks. Beaks is Abin. And I asked them what they're doing for self care these days so I could shamelessly steal that for this week segment. And they said that they were wearing cozy sweaters and making sure to check in with their body to see if they needed warmer socks, and not put off those kind of warming things. So much like I once reminded you to go to the bathroom when we need to go to the bathroom and not when he finished the next task, I'm here to remind you to make yourself warm when you are cold and not use your body as a bargaining chip against productivity. And I do this! The other day I was doing this! I was so cold, just too cold to focus and yet I was like, "I will finish reading this article before I go and find warmer clothes." That

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doesn't work. You're just cold. You just need to pee. You just are so thirsty and you just gotta take care of your body. Here to remind you to check in with your body, to keep yourself warm. Maybe stash a scarf or a toque in your bag. Maybe leave a warm sweater in your office, just as back up, just for those particularly surprising days. Dig out those warm socks. You are 100% worth it. And also, I'm pretty sure that there's something about brain cells, and freezing, and science firing neurons that can happen when you're too cold. Stay warm, cozy, and have a great weekend. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski"]

Hannah (Host):

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As always, you can find show notes and the rest of the episodes of *Secret Feminist Agenda* on secretfeministagenda.com. You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor, you can follow Kaarina @kaarinasaurus, and you can tweet bout the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. You can also rate and review it on Apple Podcasts, which is a great way to help other people find the podcast. B Benwell or BB Enwell. I'm gonna say B Benwell and Canadian Earballs have recently reviewed the podcast. Be More like Canadian Earballs, what a great name, and go add your own review. There are currently 34 customer reviews there and there are definitely more than 34 people that listen to this podcast. So just saying numbers don't lie, except when they do, which is often. The podcast's theme song "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album, Chub Rub. You can download the entire album on free music, archive.org or follow them on Facebook. Kaarina's theme song is "I Will" by Mitski. *Secret Feminist Agenda* is recorded on the traditional and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh first nations where I'm grateful to live and work. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]