

## Episode 1.7 *Basic Witches* with Jaya Saxena and Jess Zimmerman

August 25, 2017

Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Welcome back all my precious creatures. I know I always say this, but I have a really special episode for you today in which I got to talk to a couple of real feminist heroes of mine about my favorite topic: witchcraft. But before we get to that, I want to tell you what my secret feminist agenda is this week. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah (Host): Let's talk about asking for help. Whoo boy, am I bad at this. I am amazingly bad at this. If you believe that life sends you situations to try to teach you lessons, this is the number one lesson that life is trying to teach me and I am continuously refusing to learn it. I went on a trip last summer in the month between when I finished my job at the U of A and started my job here at SFU. I spent a couple of weeks traveling out east to spend time with my friend Erin, who you're actually going to get to meet on a future episode, and during my time there, it honestly felt like everything that could go wrong did go wrong. I forgot my passport at home and needed to apply for a last minute emergency passport with the help of the woman who was living in my apartment, who I didn't know, who I was, I think, like the cousin of a friend of mine in Edmonton. You know, plus needing frequent help and flexibility from Erin, who I was staying with. Later on, on that same trip, I got food poisoning while I was staying in a hotel room with my friend Rosa and I had to send her out in the middle of the night to buy me, you know, anti-nausea stuff and she had to put me in a cab to the airport, and then I got back to Halifax and had to go to stay with my friend Emily, who got the great pleasure of feeding me soup while I slept in her guest room for two days. I was just, it was just time after time, all of these situations telling me like, it's okay to not be able to do this for yourself. It's okay to lean on your friends and it's still, it's still such a challenge for me.

I feel like in a lot of ways, my understanding of feminism has been deeply tied to independence. You know, I've talked about educating yourself and being able to do things alone and all these ideas of sort of individualism and personal power, and in a lot of ways, those are great. In a lot of ways being able to do things for yourself is really wonderful and really empowering. I love living on my own. I take a great deal of strength in the fact that I have forged a particular path for myself through life, where I got to prioritize things like my own career and my own desires. That's a thing that a lot of the time women don't get to do and we're socialized to be told is wrong and bad and selfish, but at the same time that has come for me at least at the expense of feeling really comfortable reaching out to people and saying, "I need help with this. I can't do this by myself." That that feels sometimes to me like weakness; that's a lesson I'm trying really hard to unlearn. Or to put it another way, I'm trying really hard to learn the lesson that it is okay to reach out to people. For me that's been taking the form of texting friends when I feel overwhelmed by something and asking them for help. Not yet

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material help, that feels harder to ask for, "Will you come over and help me do this thing?" Uh, it feels easier for me right now to ask for emotional help and we could spend some time thinking about why I feel more comfortable asking the women in my life for emotional labor than asking them for physical labor because that's a whole thing, isn't it? But it's been a starting point for me, you know, reaching out to a friend and saying, "I'm feeling really anxious about this thing. I can't decide whether I should go to this party or not and it's sort of freaking me out and I don't know what to do, and will you help me think through this decision" or, you know, "I'm feeling overwhelmed by this thing that I'm going through right now and can I just call you up and talk it through with you for a minute?" And yet the more I do it, the more comfortable it seems and the more evidence I have that in fact it doesn't bother my friends at all for me to reach out to them and ask them for help. In fact, they seem perfectly happy to do it, which makes sense because I am also perfectly happy to do it when my friends reach out. So, lo and behold, it's almost like we love each other and want to help each other.

I guess the next step is to get more comfortable saying things like [laughter], saying things like, "I need help putting together this Ikea bookshelf. Will you come over and help me do it?" That feels like a whole, a whole other level. [laughter] When I first moved into my current apartment, I knew almost nobody in Vancouver and I had a bunch of Ikea furniture delivered here and I unpacked the bed frame that I had purchased and the instructions had that very clear Ikea image that says, you know, it's one person trying to do it and then a line through it and then two people trying to do it and, like, a happy circle around it or whatever. Like, "Don't try to do this alone. You need a friend." And I was like, "I don't know any friends in Vancouver." So I tried to put this bed frame together by myself. [laughter] And you know, what? It was a disaster. I needed help. So there you go. If this is a challenge for you, I want to encourage you to, like me, work on reaching out to people and saying when you need help and knowing that that doesn't mean that you're less competent or less independent. That it's okay. It's okay to draw on your community for the forms of support you need. And if this is something that you are already super good at, then I want to encourage you to watch out for those friends of yours who struggle with it and help them to see that it's okay to ask for help. Help them to see that it's okay for them to need you and that you won't love them less if they get a stomach flu in your home. [laughter] [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah (Host): Now, without any further ado, let's meet Jaya and Jess. Jaya Saxena is a writer whose work I first encountered on *The Toast*, may it rest in peace. She's the co-author of the *Dad Magazine* book, the co-writer of the webcomic, *The New Amsterdam Mystery Company*, and a staff writer for *Elle.com*. Jess Zimmerman is a writer whose work I first encountered on all of the Internet and she's the editor-in-chief for *Electric Literature*. What they have in common is that they have written a blessing of a book, *Basic Witches: How to Summon Success, Banish Drama, and Raise Hell with Your Coven*. It comes out next week and we sat down to talk about it. [Music: "Witch" by The Bird and the Bee]

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- Jaya (Guest): Hi, I'm Jaya. I am the co-author of *Basic Witches* and a staff writer at *Elle.com*, and I'm very excited to be here.
- Jess (Guest): I'm Jess. I'm the other person who wrote *Basic Witches* and I'm the editor-in-chief for *Electric Literature*.
- Hannah (Host): Fantastic. Thank you both so much. I'm delighted that we've both overcome my terror of my audio recording software and to the many excitements of Skype to have you here.
- Jess (Guest): [laughter] We probably should have used something a little witchier like astral projection or something like that.
- Hannah (Host): [laughter] I mean, it would be absolutely incredible if witchcraft could catch up with technology. That would be really helpful for me.
- Jaya (Guest): Skype for witches is something that VC guys need to get on really quickly.
- Jess (Guest): [laughter] You just talk into, like, a bowl of ink and the people that you're conversing with are reflected back at you.
- Hannah (Host): I feel like maybe the witchcraft version of communication might be writing people letters. [laughter]
- Jess (Guest): Yeah. Like in toads blood or
- Hannah (Host): [laughter]
- Jaya (Guest): What's the one in Potter where you show up in a fireplace? That seems like a cool one.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah, that's a use of floo powder, right? You can either transport yourself entirely or just stick your face in the fire.
- Jaya (Guest): Yeah, seems safe.
- Hannah (Host): And there's these amazing, wildly uneven, cinematic representations of that, where one is Gary Oldman's face being monstrously recreated by fire coals. It's really deeply upsetting [laughter]
- Jess (Guest): I've got to watch the rest of these movies.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah. Oh yeah. No, they get, they—
- Jaya (Guest): They get better.

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- Hannah (Host): They do, they do. And there's a movie right in the middle where Gary Oldman wears a lot of velvet smoking jackets and smolders at preteens. So that's pretty exciting.
- Jess (Guest): Yeah, I mean that's, that's right up my alley. I mean, you could always watch the Dracula one though.
- Hannah (Host): Oh yeah.
- Jaya (Guest): Oh yeah.
- Jess (Guest): Where he does basically the same thing.
- Hannah (Host): I wonder if he has a velvet smoking jacket rider somewhere.
- Group: [laughter]
- Jaya (Guest): He's like, "No guys, I have my own."
- Hannah (Host): [laughter] He insists, one scene in every film has to have the smoking jacket in it. All right, so let's talk about this phenomenal book that you have written, which could not be more precisely bullseye in my wheelhouse. So, it is called *Basic Witches* and can we start off by talking about what in your minds a basic witch is? Because it sounds an awful lot like a basic bitch, which I'm pretty sure is somebody who wears Uggs.
- Jaya (Guest): [laughter] Yeah, I think mainly it was something that we just had a lot of fun calling it that pun when we were coming up with a name for the book and then it was sort of like, wait, why don't we just do that instead of any of the other things that we're thinking of. But yeah, I think that our view of witchcraft in the book is not, it's not religious. You know, neither of us are practicing witches or Wiccans, but we take more of a view of looking at the historic view and sort of the cultural and pop cultural view of the witch and how, whether or not, you know, women have been actually practicing magic, there are plenty of unruly, rule-breaking women out there who have been accused of being witches. And so I think we were looking to sort of tap into that history and find a way to say, "Hey, we come from a long line of women who do not want to put up with anyone's shit."
- Hannah (Host): I love that. I love the idea of reclaiming the witch because it's already something that's been used to cast aspersions on us, so like fuck, we might as well just take it.
- Jaya and Jess: Yeah.
- Jess (Guest): And part of the joke with *Basic Witches*, which is making the pun on basic bitch is that, that's kind of also something that has been treated as, you know, sort

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of... as though it's somehow fundamentally a bad thing to be this particular kind of woman and we're kind of rejecting the whole idea that there is a fundamentally bad way to be a particular kind of woman. Right? And like, neither of us really has or is especially espousing in this book the kinds of things that people associate with the basic bitch kind of archetype. That's not us specifically, but in terms of the idea of kind of saying like, "Oh, here's the kind of woman that we can dismiss or that we can deride just because of the way that she's existing in the world." Like, we're wanting to question that whether it's applied to women who are too smart and too learned and too sort of, you know, as Jaya was saying the other day, too standing near a cow and then it died.

Hannah (Host): [laughter] Always a very bad choice to make as a woman.

Jess (Guest): Or whether it's women who are seen as being kind of frivolous and, you know, unserious, which is what the kind of basic bitch concept refers to, and we're kind of not into degrading people for either of those.

Hannah (Host): That's wonderful. So let's—there's another aspect of how you're thinking about the basic witch that I really appreciated, which is I think that if you look to some sort of old school paganism and Wicca, there's often a really essentialist approach to gender, right? This idea that like, "oh, you're a woman and it's all about your menstrual blood and your womb cycles." Um, and I think, you know, for 21st century feminists, the sort of inherent transphobia of that approach to witchcraft and that approach to the idea of being a witch can be really off-putting. So tell me a little bit about how you're thinking about witches not as something that has to be about menstruation.

Jess (Guest): I mean, we did, we sort of say in the beginning of the book, we're going to talk about women a lot. Like, we're going to use the word women a lot and that's for a couple of reasons. It's because we expect that most of the people reading the book will identify as women and because a lot of the things that we're talking about reclaiming, a lot of the sort of traits that have been treated as dangerous or scary or sort of dark magic, that we're interested in kind of getting people back in touch with, they're specifically treated as dangerous when it's something that a woman does. Like, it's fine for, you know, historically, it's been fine for a man to have medical knowledge and it's very scary for a woman to have medical knowledge. But we're also very aware that there's no reason that, you know, people who don't identify as women wouldn't be reading the book, and there's certainly no reason that like, you know, you don't—it doesn't require a uterus to operate the book.

Group: [laughter]

Jess (Guest): We wanted to make sure that we weren't being too specific about, you know, about people's gender or people's physicality, but there is—

Jaya (Guest): I flip pages with my uterus.

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- Hannah (Host): Oh really? That's impressive.
- Jess (Guest): You actually shove it all the way up there and then
- Hannah (Host): I just absorb the knowledge through my cervix, like a womb-man does.
- Jaya (Guest): It's the feminine energy. No.
- Group: [laughter]
- Jess (Guest): It's like, it's like an audiobook.
- Group: [laughter]
- Jess (Guest): But I think that there was something very important about the idea of our cultural construct of femininity and sometimes having that is what makes people consider you dangerous and sometimes not having it is what people make people consider you dangerous. And so we were sort of engaging a lot with like expectations of women and how you might feel about those, how you might deal with them, how you might sort of decide which ones to embrace and decide which ones to reject. So... So yes, we're almost like engaging with, kind of, gender essentialism, but from kind of over here and looking at what's kind of projected on you.
- Jaya (Guest): Yeah. Yeah. I think in a lot of, you know, in a lot of Wicca and in a lot of witchcraft traditions, you see things about the masculine and feminine energies and how both are equal and both are needed, but that they're coded as, yes, you have masculine as aggressive and powerful and sort of outgoing and feminine as the very, you know, emotional, cooler side of things and, you know, and there is a recognition that yes, everyone has all of this inside them and sometimes being aggressive is what you need to do and sometimes being quiet and emotional is what you need to do. And I think that, you know, we recognize like, hey, these are things that other people have decided to associate with masculinity and femininity and you don't need to do that. You can just recognize them as different sides of, you know, your emotional spectrum. Yeah. It's like women do not have a monopoly on being emotional. Men do not have a monopoly on being aggressive and fighters, you know. Everybody has all of it and it's just what society tends to, as Jess was saying, expect from us and expect people to act and then punish them if they don't act within those confines.
- Jess (Guest): And the tricky double bind that women are in, I think, is that like everything that's considered feminine is supposed to be, like, kind of off-putting and gross, you know, so like, when men are emotional then that's weird, and then when women are emotional, that's also weird. But then also when women are not emotional, you know, and when we have the traits that are supposed to be more masculine, that's still weird, you know? Like all of these things—and, and we talk about this and in the very beginning of the book, we're like, to be

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accused of being a witch at the time when that was the thing that was happening, it might mean that you were too sexy. It might mean that you were not sexy enough. Like it was very dangerous for a woman to be too feminine; it was very dangerous for a woman to be too masculine. So all of those things are things that can kind of rebound on you, whether you're a woman or not, because the sort of the treating feminine traits, quote unquote "feminine traits" as dangerous and scary, that's still applied to men and non-binary people, and then there's also the, sort of, treating masculine traits as off-putting and scary is, you know, also a double bind that a lot of us are in.

Jaya (Guest): And you know, it's like, I also think it's like everyone's different. Some people get their periods and feel really connected to themselves and connected to the world when that happens, and, you know, the idea that your body can make life or whatever, and some people get their periods and just think it's a pain in the ass and you know, you don't... that's up to you.

Jess (Guest): Or get dysphoric about it.

Jaya (Guest): Or get dysphoric about it or just, you know, think, "okay, whatever," and then move on with their day. Like, there's so many reactions to this and we didn't want to presume anything about anyone and I think what we try to do a lot in the book is give a lot of different options of ways you can look at the world, of things you can do, but then say it's also fine if none of this is resonating with you and if you don't actually feel like this is a way to look at things that applies.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. One of my favorite examples of that is the spell for banishing your own personal demons where you give a number of examples of demons one might have and then encourage people to articulate their own and also draw their own.

Jaya (Guest): [laughter]

Hannah (Host): Which is just this beautiful way of saying we can take these sort of practices, which in a lot of ways are embedded in sort of... you know, ritual often comes out of familiar repeated actions. Right? So, traditional forms of Wicca often look like, "Oh, you have to do this thing in exactly this way, otherwise it won't work." And the book really opens up this space to say I can find a power in ritual, in intention, in a more sacred approach to my day-to-day life and it doesn't need to actually follow a set of rules and that really opens up a lot of space for people to think of magic differently.

Jaya (Guest): Yeah. Well, and we actually have a section in the book at the end, once you've read through all of this, where we're kind of like, you know, we'd laid out a bunch of possible spells, but if they don't work for you or if we haven't every possible aspect of human existence, here's how to make your own. Here are some of the things to think through in terms of figuring out what aspect of a ritual is going to be meaningful to you, what symbols are going to resonate with you, because, yeah, it really is much more about kind of figuring out how to get

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past your own mental and interior boundaries than it is about, you know, doing exactly what we say.

Hannah (Host): So I would like to talk a little bit about ugliness, because that is something you touched on quite early on and there's a really interesting sort of move towards, towards sort of embracing ugliness and that's not, I dunno, I feel like that is actually not something that I hear much as a feminist stance. I hear much more a sort of Dove "love the skin you're in, we're all actually beautiful." So can you tell me a little bit more about what you think the power of embracing ugliness is.

Jaya (Guest): I mean, I they like, you know, in general and on a very basic level, women especially, but everyone is sold some model of conventional attractiveness and it's a very white model and it's very thin model and only a certain percentage of people fall into that and everyone else gets thrown away. And I totally get, you know, a lot of the move of, yes, let's make the definition of beautiful, let's expand that. Let's include, you know, different body sizes, people of different backgrounds, people, you know, have everything. But I think that in general, everyone, even if you're fine with your body, you're not going to love it all the time, you know, and loving your body, I think, still puts the pressure on thinking of beauty as something that's very important. And it can be important to you and it can be something you play with and enjoy. I mean, like, I love makeup. I love experimenting with it and trying new things with it, but making room for also it to be okay if you just don't care about it, it's not what you want to focus your life on because it doesn't need to be.

Jess (Guest): I actually just wrote a whole big essay on this, which, seemed to really resonate with a lot of people and I can only assume that that's because, you know, this idea has been out there—I'm certainly not the first person to talk about embracing ugliness—but I think you're right that it's not out there very much and that this sort of... version is a lot more common where it's sort of like, "Oh no, but you're beautiful, everyone's beautiful, you're beautiful in your own way." And the thing is that like the entire construct of beautiful has been so weighted down with patriarchal expectations and has been weighted down with, like it's really sort of freighted with morality, you know? There's this idea that like the beautiful is also good and the ugly is also bad and evil, and when that gets combined with sort of the way that we define beautiful, which is extremely patriarchal, it's extremely white, it's, you know, it's a very, very narrow standard in terms of sort of what your body can look like and what your sort of phenotype can be, you know. And so when that also, when you sort of recognize that, that that narrow standard is not only defining what makes a person beautiful, but defining what makes a person be seen as moral and virtuous, like, it's really enough to make you want to step away from the entire construct. And it's also interesting to step away from because the flip side of having this really narrow idea of beauty is that ugliness is enormous comparatively. You know, there's so many options. There's so much you can do that's not choosing—

Hannah (Host): There's so many ways to be ugly!

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Jess (Guest): There's so many ways to ugly, and this is—I'm actually looking because I'm in my living room right now and I'm looking at an Umberto Eco book that I was just reading called *On Ugliness*, and he gave a talk, I'm going to get, I may get this quote a little bit wrong, but he gave a talk that was based on his research for this book, which is a history of ugliness, in which he said “Beauty is finite; ugliness is infinite like God.”

Hannah (Host): Hmm, yes.

Jess (Guest): I mean, I think that's really true. I think beauty is so finite and if we assume that ugliness is not, you know, moral failings, right, but that ugliness is just not beauty, there's this whole universe out there that is ways that... ways that you're allowed to look, ways that you're allowed to present yourself and we don't have to say all of those are beautiful. We can just say all of those are valid. All of those are ways that a person can look.

Jaya (Guest): Jess, I love that thing that you just said about ugliness just being not beauty and anything that doesn't accomplish beauty, because right when you think of the word ugly, it is loaded the same way that beauty is, you know. It's loaded as bad and amoral and an insult and all of these things in a way that you would never want to describe anything as ugly, but there's just a way of thinking, how do you live without engaging in beauty or engaging in it on your own terms and in a way that feels like, you know, you can be a complete person without it, you know, when it runs out because it's finite.

Jess (Guest): And I think that's sort of like rejecting the idea that beauty is a requirement because I think that a lot of women or a lot of people who were raised women are raised with the idea that beauty is almost like the dues that you pay for being allowed to exist in the world. Like, it's expected of you and if you're not achieving it then you're somehow, like, not earning your place. And if you can kind of divorce it from that, then it allows you to kind of engage with some of the trappings of beauty and some of the tropes of beauty and mix them up a little bit and do it more on your terms, in the same way as like femininity. You know, like once femininity is not, like, the tax that you pay for existing in the world. As someone who was raised female or as someone who presents female now, then it becomes something that you can kind of play with.

Hannah (Host): Yeah. And it also becomes a way of sort of refusing, right? Like the demand that everybody is beautiful is also a capitalist invention, right? The cosmetics industry was an invention that emerged at the same time as advertising as an industry. It's a way of telling you that you're never enough and always need to buy something to make yourself good enough.

Jaya (Guest): Exactly.

Hannah (Host): So magic also becomes a way of intervening in capitalism in that way and saying like, “no, actually I can find a space outside of a Sephora.”

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- Group: [laughter]
- Hannah (Host): I mean, I love Sephora really profoundly obviously, but I can actually find a space outside of Sephora where I can also sort of embrace a different approach to aesthetics or to, or to glamour, to use the magical term.
- Jaya (Guest): And you know, we have a portion in there of how to sort of make your own makeup in these fun ways of, "Oh, if you mix some beet juice with coconut oil, you can get a fun lip tint or you can use cinnamon to make a bronzer" or all these things. It doesn't mean, I don't know, you still have to give your money to big coconut oil,
- Hannah (Host): [laughter]
- Jaya (Guest): but it's a way for you to still, you know, do things a little bit more on your own terms.
- Jess (Guest): And then that makes Sephora into sort of a tool that you can use or a sacred space that you can enter as part of sort of having your own relationship with beauty. But then it's not, you know, it's not something that you rely on, like you're not, you're not absolutely dependent on product X.
- Hannah (Host): Yeah. So, along those lines of embracing ugliness, which is also kind of a way of embracing being outside of the status quo, I really love the sentence, "Think of us as your Hagrids," which is just,
- Jaya and Jess: [laughter]
- Hannah (Host): it was such an unexpected vision for you to ask your readers to apply to you, but also so perfect because what a gorgeous sort of image of a messenger character who absolutely refuses norms of beauty.
- Group: [laughter]
- Jess (Guest): It's true. I wasn't even thinking about that.
- Jaya (Guest): Yeah, now that you bring that up, you know, because I was thinking of, okay, what are other sort of witchy adjacent, you know, guiding characters, and I feel like the classic one is always the Good Witch in the Wizard of Oz, and, you know, if you want to talk about the peak of beauty and femininity, the woman coming down from the sky at a sparkly pink poofy dress is absolutely it. But I dunno, Hagrid with his little pink umbrella and a birthday cake seems more our speed [laughter]
- Jess (Guest): You're a wizard Hannah!
- Hannah (Host): And his tendency to refer to himself as mummy.

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- Group: [laughter]
- Hannah (Host): This is beautiful.
- Jess (Guest): But he is! in a way, I mean like in a way he is. Because the thing about, about this thing about Glinda, right, is that she's coming to sort of offer you, like, maybe information, maybe help, but she's not coming to offer you your membership in the sorority. Right? And what's so great about Hagrid is he's like, he's almost like a wizard midwife.
- Hannah (Host): Mmm [tender sound]
- Jess (Guest): You know, like he sort of shepherds you into the magical world and so that's much more the kind of thing that we were after.
- Jaya (Guest): The word midwife. That's a...
- Hannah (Host): It's perfect. He's constantly pictured holding babies. Like it's the absolute best, best image. So—
- Jaya (Guest): But I feel like there's a lot of overlap. I mean like I'm very hairy. Both of us really love animals...
- Hannah (Host): [laughter]
- Jess (Guest): I'm sort of a large person.
- Jaya (Guest): There's just, there's a lot. We both like cake. There's this whole thing.
- Jess (Guest): I can't do any magic at all.
- Group: [laughter]
- Hannah (Host): I'm constantly bringing children into super deadly forests. Just all of these things...
- Jaya (Guest): Yeah, always. [Music: "Witch" by The Bird and the Bee]
- Hannah (Host): To keep the magic going, you can head to Twitter and follow Jaya at @jayasax. So that's J A Y A S A X and Jess at @j\_zimms, Z I M M S. Go pre-order *Basic Witches* right now, and then tweet about it using the hashtag #basicwitches because I really want to talk to all of you about this book. If you're in the New York area, you can head to the launch next week on August 29th at the Astoria bookshop. I've posted the link for the event in the show notes as well as the article on ugliness that Jess references. As usual, you can find all the episodes and the weekly reading list on [secretfeministagenda.com](http://secretfeministagenda.com). You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor and tweet about the podcast using the hashtag

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#secretfeministagenda. And don't forget to subscribe and rate and review on whatever platform you use. It's the best way to pass this agenda on. The podcast theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album, *Chub Rub*. I will never get tired of saying that phrase. You can download the entire album on [freemusicarchive.org](http://freemusicarchive.org), or follow them on Facebook. Jaya and Jess' theme song was "Witch" by The Bird and the Bee off their album, "Ray Guns are not Just the Future." That's it for this week, folks. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]