

## Episode 2.29 Rereading/Rewatching/Rethinking

August 17, 2018

Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] I'm Hannah McGregor and this is Secret Feminist Agenda. Let me start this episode with a couple of announcements. First, this is the second last episode, the penultimate episode of season two. Next week we'll be closing it out with a really fun episode. We're past guests. Lucia Lorenzi interviews me about Secret Feminist Agenda and what I've learned from the project thus far. Have no fear, however, I'm taking the month of September off to regroup and then I'll be back in October with season three. In the meantime, I'll be asking for some feedback on season two, so look out for that. Also, I'm delighted to say that through the generous funding of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the tremendous hard work of my research assistant, Megan, full transcriptions of season one are now available at [secretfeministagenda.com/transcriptions](http://secretfeministagenda.com/transcriptions). I've also attached the transcriptions to their episodes. I'm working with my collaborators at Wilfrid Laurier University Press to figure out sustainable ways for transcriptions to happen even sooner with the ultimate goal of incorporating them into our workflow so that they come out alongside or only shortly after the audio episodes. Stay tuned for more on that, and thanks so much for your patience as we've been sorting this out. Enough with the announcements. Let me tell you what my secret feminist agenda is this week. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] I want to talk about re, well, re a lot of things. I want to talk about rewatching, and rereading, and rethinking, and reconsidering, and redoing. I want to talk about repetition and the ways in which it can help us to think about things differently. I was thinking about rewatching and the way that it reframes our understandings of things this morning as I was rewatching some old Buffy episodes. Probably my second favorite rewatch is old Buffy episodes after Parks and Recreation, which I have rewatched a number of times. My previous favorite rewatch was the BBC miniseries of Pride and Prejudice starring Colin Firth. My mum and I taped it onto VHS tapes off the TV in I guess 1992, I think was when it first aired, and I rewatched those tapes every time I was sick for about five years. So there's an obvious aspect of rewatching and rereading that's about comfort. We go and reencounter familiar characters, familiar texts, familiar, storylines, familiar worlds because they sooth us. Particularly ones that we encountered for the first time in childhood, maybe that were read to us by our parents, feel comforting when we go back to them. They can sort of return us to the emotional state in which we read them for the first time. I wrote an essay this year about Harry Potter reread podcasts, which as probably many of you know, was the first kind of podcast that I made, and as I was doing some reading about the practice of rereading, I came across a really interesting book by an English prof Patricia Meyer Spacks. The book's called On Rereading and it's about exactly this phenomenon. And she talks in the introduction about, you know, this, this idea of comfort, the way that we reread because it soothes us and even she argues, sort of creates in us a sense of the stability of our own identities. You know, this is based on the idea that identity is not a singular and

self contained and totally interior thing, but something that's produced via how we interact with the world around us. So the idea that sort of cultural objects, that particular cultural objects that we revisit again and again can be a way of sort of establishing and reestablishing our identities. That makes sense to me. The same way that continuous longterm relationships can give you that sense of stability in your identity over time. But Spacks is also interested, and I'm also interested, in the elements of change that come through revisiting things, especially when you revisit things a lot. Because the other thing that rereading or rewatching can do can give you a chance to rethink the, the cultural object in question, right? You go back to it when you're a little bit older or a little bit wiser and things stand out to you that maybe didn't stand out on the first, or fifth, or 10th encounter. That's actually, I mean part of the the core premise of reread and rewatch podcasts in general and certainly of *Witch, Please*, which is the Harry Potter reread podcasts that I make with my friend Marcel. Made. Gul, mostly finishing up making. And it really was about sort of going back and rereading the familiar series and and seeing how being trained literary critics, and reading it together, and in conversation would shift our perspective on books that were more or less familiar to us. More familiar to Marcel than to me, certainly. And this morning I was cuddling with my cat on the couch and watching an episode of season four of *Buffy*, specifically season four, episode eight. It's called "Pangs" and it's the one where it's Thanksgiving and a vengeful Shumash spirit is accidentally released and everybody has to deal with their white settler guilt as they decide whether or not to defeat the spirit. It's super fucked up. I'm not going to delve into that. There's actually a really incredible episode of *Métis in Space* that I will link to that does a better job than I ever would have unpacking the fucked up-edness of this episode. But I was sort of sitting there thinking about, you know, how some episodes of *Buffy* have not aged well, and then at the same time was reading up on what's going on with Judith Butler. So let me catch you up on this, in case you're not an academic yourself and haven't been following this. So Judith Butler is a renowned, extremely significant feminist and queer studies scholar, perhaps most famously she wrote *Gender Trouble*. She's one of the originators of the idea that gender is performative rather than intrinsic and essential to us. *Gender Trouble* was a profoundly important book to me. I read it for the first time in the third year of my undergrad while I was taking a feminist theology course at the University of Edinburgh, and it was my first encounter with a nonessentialist idea of gender. That is one that pushes back against the idea that there are just innate, and true, and profound, and timeless aspects to femininity and masculinity. You know, I was raised by pretty essentialist feminists who believed that gender was, was real and stable. And encountering this idea that gender's socially constructed and created through this sort of iterative performance of gender and thus that there was nothing essential, or timeless, or true about it was mind blowing and profoundly liberating for me. It was the first time I'd ever encountered a work of theory that really substantially changed my view of the world. That's some context about who Judith Butler is, just in case you are not familiar with her. What's going on with Judith Butler is that she, along with a number of other very prominent scholars recently signed a letter defending a colleague of theirs who has been accused of sexual harassment of a student. I

mean, this is probably going to sound pretty familiar because it's turning into a pattern, which is prominent university faculty members accused of sexual harassment, an investigation is done that finds that there's enough evidence to support in this particular case, putting the professor in question on leave for a year. That's, I don't know if there's gonna be consequences beyond that, but that's what's happening right now, and that academics' powerful and prominent friends publicly come to their defense. Now this particular case has been causing some discomfort for people. Maybe has an added layer of complexity because the accused of Avital Ronell is a feminist philosophy professor and the accuser is a male graduate student of hers or male former graduate student of hers. Nonetheless, that, that basic dynamic of powerful people come to the defense of the powerful is repeated yet again in this case. There was a, a, what in the US is called Title IX investigation. The university did find just cause to suspend Professor Ronell. Nevertheless, her friends wrote an open letter. Can we ban open letters? Maybe. Anyway, here's some of what they said. They said, "Although we have no access to the confidential dossier," that is the information in the Title IX complaint, "we have all worked for many years in close proximity to Professor Ronell," and then they go onto say, "We testify to the grace, the keen wit, and the intellectual commitment of Professor Ronell, and ask that she be accorded the dignity rightly deserved by someone of her international standing and reputation." So the gist of that is she is smart and also famous. So, dot, dot, dot. So different standards apply to her. So her intellectual prestige means that she can't be responsible for sexual harassment. So, I mean hard to say, except that we know that that's exactly how power works, that you are powerful and prestigious and that power and prestige is supposed to protect you from, from accusations of all sorts. And it's supposed to give you leave for kinds of behavior that would be unacceptable for people who are less powerful and less prestigious. Anyway, so I'm sitting on the couch, I'm rewatching this Buffy episode. I'm reading this news about Butler and I'm thinking about things that don't age well. And I'm thinking about rereading, and rewatching, and revisiting, and rethinking, and about that idea of identity stability and then the counter idea of identity instability. Which is to say the instability of our own identities, or more generally how we change over time and develop new perspectives on things, and this is what Spacks says about the act of reading. She says, "the dynamic of status and change that I've been talking about calls attention to the intricate processes of exchange between reader and text that mark every act of reading. When I speak of apparent change in a reread work, of changing relationships between reader and text, of alterations in what we see, we necessarily allude to changes in the reader. The books words remain those that we read before. We may, however, notice language that we have not previously attended to as reread again, or the words may carry new meaning. Such possibilities probably register, at least in part, how our minds, hearts, Experience, personal and cultural situation, or all of the above, or maybe just our mood have changed since the last time we read those words. Reading a book or rereading it, we enter into relation not only with the text but with an imagined author. Rereading, we relate also to one or more version of our past selves. Examining the textures of these relationships, we learn both about ourselves and about complicated connections informing the

mysterious process of reading," end quote. I've been thinking a lot about the culture of cancellation. That is to say that sort of social media centric tendency to declare individuals canceled, to insist that people either be perfectly virtuous and heroic or beyond the pale and shunned. I really do think a significant part of it is, is a product of how social media reshapes the ways in which we socialize with each other, and I also think that it is part of the sort of 21st century media-saturated desperate desire for a hot take. The way that that sort of the speed and intensity of how information moves right now, tends us towards thinking once and moving on. Towards taking a stance and not reconsidering it, and that's exacerbated even more by the way that the Internet leaves these long trails of everything that we've thought and said before, making it really hard to revisit, rethink, take on a different perspective. It's something that Marcel and I have struggled with in making *Witch, Please* because we don't necessarily agree with everything we said in those early episodes and the desire can be to go back and edit them so they're constantly kept up to date with, with what we think right now, but then to erase that process of reading and our own process of coming to understand things differently also seems counterproductive because what we have is a recording of how perspective changes over time. I think in a lot of ways I've come to terms with what it means to love a cultural object and recognize its flaws and be able to critique it and love it at the same time. It's a thing that we talk about on *Witch, Please* a lot. It's, it's something that the delightful hosts of the delightful podcast *Buffering the Vampire Slayer* also talk about. That's a *Buffy* rewatch podcast in case you somehow are already listening. It's so good. But Kristen Russo and Jenny Owen-Youngs are grappling with exactly that same thing and this sort of status of a beloved show that has such apparent flaws, and the ability to take joy in the fandom of it while not ignoring those flaws. But I'm not quite sure what to do with when the problem is a person. I'm not sure to what degree to say, "well, if this person believes this, what does it say of their work?" I want to work against just cancelling people. I want to work against announcing that people are over, that they're, that they're dead to us now. Which isn't to say that I don't want there to be consequences for abuses of power, or that I want to desperately hold onto star systems and forms of celebrity that push particular individuals into situations where they have access to that abusive power. I think, I think those systems are are deeply flawed and deeply rooted in capitalism and white supremacy, and that we need to be pushing back hard against them. But I guess— if you want to think of this as a sort of slow down part two— I guess I just want to think of these moments as calling upon us to pause and reread, rethink, reconsider. So like, yeah, let's do the necessary work of critique and protest that makes the world safer and more livable for people for whom it is not safe and livable right now and that means fucking eradicating the permissiveness around sexual harassment, assault, and abuse in universities. And in different ways it means naming and speaking back to the insidious forms of racism, sexism, ableism that we see in the cultural objects we love. In some ways those are part of the same project, but let's also think about how rewatching and rereading and rethinking are not the same thing as a erasure that instead they're a, they're a reframing of our relationship too that charts in really important ways the way that we're constantly shifting, and our relationships to the things that mattered to us shift at the same time.

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And that's just kind of part of the business of being a thinking person. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] You know who else is a thinking person in the world? Segue of the year. Let's hear from Kaarina. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Kaarina:

Hello and welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self Care Corner. I'm speaking to you from the past. Okay, so any podcast recording that's not live is from the past, but I'm recording this two and a half weeks early so that I can have it ready before I go on a trip. So today I am thinking about hobbies. So I was so lucky that Hannah McGregor, host of Secret Feminist Agenda, visited Halifax just a couple weeks ago. And I got to hang out with her for a full day. Let me tell you, it was magical. We ate lunch, woohoo! We wandered around a garden. We drank lattes with rainbows and glitter in them. We ate waffles in the shape of fish, filled with blueberries. We had a great day. And one of the things we talked about was hobbies and how it can be really important to have what Hannah called nonproductive hobbies when you are engaged with work well, any kind of work really, but we were thinking specifically about academic work, which can be very brain-based work as opposed to physical work that can feel really nonproductive or nonpractical. You can spend a whole day reading articles, or marking papers, or answering emails and feel like you don't have a ton to show for it, and feel like you're not that much farther ahead in your tasks. Throughout my graduate work, hobbies have been a really important way for me to feel, I don't know, like an effective human being, if that makes any sense. And with that in mind, I like the way that Hannah calls them nonproductive hobbies because they kind of resist the ways that capitalism values us based on our productivity. But I also like that they can have practical outcomes. So my major nonproductive hobby is sewing and it produces quite a bit. Right now I'm wearing a skirt that I sewed myself. It has fricken pockets because when you sew your own clothes, you get add pockets to everything. And I guess it is nonproductive in that I make many mistakes and I produce things that are very imperfect. And I see the value in that kind of learning labor, which academia does not always see the value in failure, and that's something I would love to talk about in a future episode. But in your hobbies, failure is okay and failure is a necessary part of learning. So I encourage you to think about the wonderful ways that you spend time outside of your paid, or hopefully paid work, maybe unpaid work, the wonderful ways that you occupy in your brain and your hands. And the wonderful things that you try and experiment with and play with. And really appreciate all the things that those add to your life, even if you're not producing, or earning, or moving forward in your career. Hobbies are great and I hope you have room in your life for one. So have a great weekend and let me know what your hobbies are. Bye. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Hannah (Host):

As always, you can find show notes and the rest of the episodes of Secret Feminist Agenda on [secretfeministagenda.com](http://secretfeministagenda.com). You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor, and you can follow Kaarina @kaarinasaurus. And you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda and keep on rating and reviewing the show. It's the best way for other people to find it. The podcast's theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album Chub Rub. You can download the entire album on [freemusicarchive.org](http://freemusicarchive.org), or follow them on

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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, 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]