



The Lit Review Podcast

English Transcript

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Guest/Topic: Stephanie Skora on *Blood, Marriage, Wine, & Glitter* by S. Bear Bergman

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[Intro context: Page and Monica are talking about the proposed city budget by the current Mayor of Chicago, Lori Lightfoot, and how harmful it is for marginalized communities.]

Page May (00:00):

... Anxiety is through the roof. It is one day 'til elections. Oh my God. Don't look at Twitter. Everything is terrible. I hate it here. How are you, Monica?

Monica Trinidad (00:10):

Oh my God. I don't even know what to say or how I feel right now. I really just want people to listen to this episode. Stephanie goes in so hard on how critical it is for people to vote, particularly in this local election in Chicago. The amount of anti-fair tax ads I've encountered on the radio and online is so freaking wild and billionaires are spending so much money right now trying to oppose this. It's really infuriating. So I just wanted to shout out Grassroots Collaborative, who's been doing a ton of work to educate folks on this amendment. Yeah. So I don't know. What's what's been going on with you outside of elections?

Page May (00:46):

I am hanging in there trying to focus on what I can control. Now we're in the budget fight and there's a lot going on and there's a lot at stake. And last time we released an episode, Lori [Lightfoot] had just released her budget. And so now we've got a firmer sense of where things stand and what the numbers are. And yeah, I mean, she's trying to increase CPD's percentage of the corporate fund budget from 37% to 39%, which is just outrageous. And there's actually a really great article that I think we should share on our social media, from Injustice Watch, that has a really good breakdown of the numbers. It also talks about this really important aspect of her proposal, that a lot of people are showing excitement for that I think don't understand how

little it actually does and how further entrenched it makes us into policing. That being this co-responder program that Lori is putting forward.

Page May (01:42):

Here in the US, at least a quarter of the people who are killed by the police are folks that have a mental health illness. And so there's been a growing conversation about how we need to decriminalize mental health and take police out of the equation. And that's been pushed by grassroots groups and communities forever. And Lori has tried to present this sort of pilot program that really is just more of the same, with funding for police to show up as a co-responder to mental health crises. And the thing about this is not only is that just more of the same, but also it's coming at a moment where we have a real suggestion, solution on the table, this Treatment Not Trauma ordinance that would just take police out of the equation. And it would expand resources for mental health services throughout the city of Chicago, creating this mobile mental health unit and a 211 number and all these things. And I could talk all day about this, but yeah. What are you thinking about it all, Monica?

Monica Trinidad (02:40):

The problem with the co-responder model is that it really ignores the fact that real safety comes from decreasing the amount of contact with police, period. And so this sort of "crisis trained officer" coming out alongside a therapist is still an officer who is deeply embedded in this anti-Black, anti-poor system, and an officer who is still going to see themselves as the authority in a situation. And it's also true that many people who exist at the margins, seeing cops is super triggering and can create an even more intense and heightened reaction upon their arrival. And so, yeah, if Lori continues to just not address the real issue around a lack of mental healthcare in Chicago, we're not going to get anywhere. And we're unfortunately going to keep seeing people with mental health issues getting killed by police. So I really hope people see through another one of her disastrous ideas and supports Rossana's ordinance instead. Because I mean, if Lori can't even create a logical safety plan during this pandemic, then what makes us think she can keep us safe during a mental health crisis?

Page May (03:44):

And actually of course since she's put this forward, of course, you've had the uprisings in Philly take place because of the murder of Walter Wallace, who was a Black man, a young Black man who was having a mental health crisis and whose mother tried desperately to get the police to back off and to deescalate the situation and didn't want them there. And they murdered him. And yeah, I mean, this is happening in real time. And there was an interview I saw with Marc Lamont Hill talking about how when you're a hammer, you treat everything, and you see a nail, all you know how to do is act like a hammer, and that's the police. Right? All they're going to do is be a hammer and we keep expecting different results.

Page May (04:28):

So love to Philly, love to Walter Wallace's family. May he rest in power. And I think that this is the hard space that we're in right now of just these horrible tragedies continuing to happen in real time. As we fight, as we organize, we're still losing people and this is life or death and I feel grounded in that. And there's also so much love that we have for each other. And we're fighting for our lives, but we're fighting out of love. And I think this episode speaks really well to that sort of harsh, but human aspect of it all. So yeah. I love this episode. I don't know, Monica, do you want to share some of your highlights? Why people should listen?

Monica (05:08):

I mean, I love this conversation with Stephanie. She covers so much in such a short amount of time. Something that's sticking with me is how she talked about personal narrative and storytelling, which is super important for me in my organizing strategy. But she talks about it for trans people in a really unique way that I've never heard before. So I hope folks tune in and hear what she has to say on that. I don't want to spoil it. So yeah. So here it is, our conversation with Stephanie Skora. We're talking about the book, *Blood, Marriage, Wine, & Glitter* by S. Bear Bergman.

[MUSICAL INTRO STARTS]

[Sound of book pages turning, soft instrumental music begins from the hip hop song "Chicago" by David Ellis]

Monica: You're listening to the Lit Review Podcast.

Page: We're your hosts, Page May and Monica Trinidad.

Mariame Kaba voiceover: "I think it's essential for people to learn together in order to be able to understand what we're up against..."

[Protest Chanting and drumming] "CPD, shut it down! New Jim Crow, shut it down!" [Inaudible chanting] "I said No Cop Academy, 95 mil for community!"

Page voiceover at protest rally: "We must disrupt, we must disobey, we must agitate, we must escalate, we must break, we must create, we must abolish, we must transform -"

Young person voiceover: "...I remember it, she was shot by my house -"

Mariame voiceover: "...In sharing our ideas, we're stronger..."

[Music Lyrics begin] "Welcome to Chicago, this is home for most. This is the home of the wealthy, making cameos. This is the house of the heartless, the home of the cold. Man, my dog

gets more acknowledgement than homeless folks. This is the house, a generation filled in Audy homes..." [Music Fades]

[INTRO FADES OUT]

Monica (06:37):

Well, Stephanie, we are so excited to have you on the show today. How are you holding up?

Stephanie (06:44):

I'm holding up okay. I'm holding up okay. I can complain, especially because I'm Jewish and because there's a pandemic, but it could be worse. Could be a lot worse for sure.

Monica (06:58):

That's so real. Absolutely so real. Well, we're really excited to talk about this book with you today and just want to quickly, before we do that, hear a little bit about yourself. So if you could share with us, who are you, what do you do in Chicago and why?

Stephanie (07:16):

Oh God. Okay. Well, my name's Stephanie Skora. My pronouns are she, her, and hers. I am a writer, educator, organizer and nonprofiteer. I am the Associate Executive Director at Brave Space Alliance, the coolest LGBT center in town. And in my spare time when I'm not going to bed before 11:00 PM, because I am an old woman, I am mean to politicians on the internet. And I write the Girl, I Guess Voter Guide, which is a great time, a great time.

Page (07:48):

For folks who don't know, can you just tell us briefly a little bit more about the Girl, I Guess Voter Guide?

Stephanie (07:55):

Yes. It's a leftist/progressive branded take on voting and coverage of every election in Cook County that's competitive. I go through interesting elections, competitive races, and just informational tidbits, write it all out in a Google doc format, and try to apply my own brand of humor to it. So I'm just, you know, a ruthless faggy asshole to sitting elected officials and candidates for public office. Public officials take themselves so seriously. And there's this air of universal respectability about politicians. In the news, you never hear people calling the mayor an asshole, even if everybody thinks that she's an asshole. Nobody ever calls their alder person a dick, even if they think he's a dick.

Stephanie (08:43):

But when we're having conversations with each other about politicians and about people who hold public office and are in positions of power, we fucking hate these people a lot of the time, and we talk about them very candidly, but that those opinions don't make it into the public discourse. So I thought that it was important, and my friend Ellen Mayer, when we started writing the guide in 2018, we thought it was important to bring the honest conversation about politics. We wanted to bring that into the public discourse. And part of that is saying like, "Look, you are a goofy asshole whose hair hasn't been cut since the 1970s and your politics reflect that." Then that's what I'm going to say in the guide. If you don't want those things said about you, then don't be a goofy asshole with a haircut from the 1970s. So that's part of it. Part of it is bringing sort of the irreverence of public discourse about politics into electoral politics itself.

Stephanie (09:34):

And the other part is bringing voter education and public voter education to a segment of the population that has a really strong voice and is very politically engaged, but tends not to be engaged in electoral politics. When in some cases, one could argue that we should be more engaged in it. Ellen and I wanted to write a guide, and I continue to write a guide, that would give an easy breakdown to our radical voting skeptic leftist friends on how they could participate and how they could vote without them feeling like they had to devote their time and energy to researching something they don't believe in.

Monica (10:12):

That's right. And I will say that I have seen this guide everywhere on the internet and I've used the guide. So I'm so appreciative and thankful for you and Ellen for putting this together. Do you have a sense of the reach of this guide at all?

Stephanie (10:28):

The 2018 General Election Guide, which was only our second guide, had been used by 4% of the registered voters in Cook County.

Monica Trinidad (10:36):

That four percent statistic though. That's telling enough though, I think.

Stephanie (10:40):

Yeah. 4%, two years ago. And the guide's only gotten bigger since then.

Monica (10:43):

Exactly.

Stephanie (10:44):

So what I'm going to do this time is I'm going to watch some of the judicial elections that I gave particular attention to that a lot of other folks haven't been talking about, and sort of extrapolate my vote share based off of those. But if it's 4%, I'll take that 4%. Worthwhile folks and badass leaders have been elected with a hell of a lot less than 4% of the vote.

Page (11:03):

Yeah. I have really appreciated it. Not only because I really don't enjoy voting and it makes me laugh, but also because I'm learning that I remember the first time I voted in Chicago, I didn't know what half of the things on the ballot were. And it actually is a really helpful overview to understand what these positions are and why they matter without lifting anyone up onto a pedestal to say that this person's going to fix everything. And yeah. So I really appreciate it. If we're cool, we can start talking about this book. I'm really stoked. I was skimming through it a little bit this morning and it is really beautiful. And I'm curious to hear first, just what led you to read it?

Stephanie (11:42):

My friend S. Bear Bergman is a wonderful individual who I met many, many years ago, very, very early in my coming out process. I was still in college. I had probably been out when I met Bear for like six months. They are a Jewish person and a self-described fag and an old school transsexual in the style of Kate Borenstein, who I also met right when I was coming out. And just something about the combination of queerness and Judaism and transness and no fucks give-itude really spoke to baby Steph at that time, and really informed the gender that I was going to grow into. And I bought a lot of Bear's books when I was seeing them in various places, because I love them as a human. And also because they were writing is really good.

Stephanie (12:34):

And I keep returning to them when I want to refresh my perspective on the previous parts of my journey or to learn something from somebody that I consider one of my living transectors, because so for the folks who don't know, S. Bear Bergman is a performer, a writer, an educator and an organizer and an activist who is just one of the best people I've ever met. And their books are mostly written in the style of frank essays that are not intended to be comedic, but are also funny because that's Bear's storytelling style. And so it's a book of essays just about stuff that has happened to them in their lives and things that they think about it. I was rereading it this morning because I hadn't picked it up in a couple years, and I was just reminded how poignant and beautiful the writing is and how differently it speaks to me every time.

Stephanie (13:26):

Bear is married and has a kid and like has a family and is doing the whole family, educating, organizing life. And I'm not sure if that life is for me, but I think the comfort and the publicity that they have around their gender and their sexuality are definitely something that speaks to me

on a deep level. And the way that they blend that with a more or less observant Jewish culture and religious observance is something that I try to model. I just, I super love them and I super love their writing and I've always found their books relaxing and funny for me. So yeah, I want more folks to check them out just because I love Bear and I keep going back to their writing just because it means a lot to me.

Monica (14:12):

That's really beautiful. And our understanding of this book, *Blood, Marriage, Wine & Glitter* is it's very thematic around the concept of families. What is a family and what can it be? Especially being a trans person in a heteronormative family. So can you tell us more about what the author is exploring in this book?

Stephanie (14:33):

Yeah. So this book, Bear wrote it after them and their partner had a child. They had written previous collections of essays before about their life as a trans Jewish person and their career speaking and performing across Canada and the US and other places. They had written to some extent about family because as a public queer and trans person, we all have to talk about family all the time, but they wanted to write a book specifically exploring their identities and their life and their intersection with their experience of family and how their family is not just them and their partner and their kid and now their other kid, but also all of their lovers and their lovers' friends and their lovers' lovers and like their sixth cousins' uncles' former granddaughter or whatever. The intricate webs of familial connections and interpersonal relationships that queer and trans people weave to keep ourselves stable and going in a world that would rather not see us that way is really the underpinning of the book, is just an exploration of the breadth of family and the depth of family as well.

Page (15:44):

I have a follow up question. I'm still sort of, it's ruminating in my head, but I guess, can you speak to the ways that heteronormative family exists and is sort of enforced? And then what is some of the interventions that are being made through this book?

Stephanie (16:01):

When each of us thinks of a family, the first image that pops into our head because it's been conditioned that way is one heterosexual man, one heterosexual woman, 2 to 2.5 children, 1.5 pets, a house or an apartment, a picket fence. It's very much this white, middle class, suburban norm that's been sold to everybody through homophobia and heteronormativity and white supremacy and capitalism and redlining and everything else. Literally every system of power and control in the country has combined to feed us this narrative of what a family is supposed to look like. I would assume that for most people that all three of us know, family doesn't look anything

like that at all. I don't know if I know a single person who's like cis het and has 2.5 kids and a pet and a house. And just the concept of that horrifies me.

Stephanie (17:00):

That's not a realistic idea of what family is supposed to be. And even just the broader concept that's tacked onto the heteronormative nuclear family, the idea that you always have to have a good relationship with your parents and your direct blood relatives and that the family that you're born into is the family that you have and that's it and that's forever and et cetera. Familial linkage and ancestor reverence are important concepts in a lot of cultures, but the idea that you can't separate from people in your biological family who may have done significant harm to you is a very heterosexual concept and a very cisgender concept. Because sometimes the people who have had the most access to you throughout your life are the people who have had the most capacity to cause you harm. And sometimes you have to cut ties with those people to heal and live your best life and exist as a human.

Stephanie (17:52):

And I wouldn't necessarily say that Bear is making a specific intervention. They're certainly not talking about anything that at the time this book was published, I think it was what, in 2017, 2016, when was it? 2013? Oh God, it's a lot older than I thought. Even in 2013, this book was prescient back then in talking about the ways that queer family exists. But I don't think Bear was trying to talk about something new because the idea of queer family and the idea of a diverse set of familial connections was not a new idea in 2013. I think what they were trying to do is portray the more personal side and the myriad complexities that family can have through the lens of their own life, instead of just exploring the depths of like gay people sometimes don't like their parents.

Stephanie (18:44):

And in fact in the book, they write quite a bit about the complex nature of their relationship with their own biological family. And they write about their grandparents and they write about how their parents still use their birth name and how that's okay because their parents are allowed to, even though it makes them feel weird. And how different people in their life know them from different times in their life. And there's a passage in there about how when them in their partner got married, they thought that they could have an icebreaker activity at the wedding by having a bingo card, and it would be name and pronoun bingo, and how every person at the wedding could go and find every single other person that uses a specific name, pronoun combination for them.

Stephanie (19:24):

And I think it's a great way of portraying... I mean, Bear isn't an old person, so I wouldn't say queerness and transness while aging, but I would certainly say it's a way of presenting midlife,

familial queerness and transness, and how it looks to have a big, beautiful transsexual family full of all sorts of far flung and immediate connections, and also have a complex, but existing relationship with one's biological family. And really an exploration of what that has meant to Bear and projecting that experience and taking their own positivities and their own strength and their own growth throughout their life with their family and who portraying it to show other queer and trans folks that you can have this family and this is one way that it can look.

Monica (20:18):

I have a follow up question. I mean, that brings up something for me around the importance of sharing personal narrative as a tool to deconstruct this idea that a certain population is a monolith. Right? Trans people are all the same or queer people are all the same. We all want the same things. Right? So I see the value and importance of sharing personal narrative. What do you feel like Bear's goals were with sharing this personal narrative, especially as an organizer activist. What do you feel was their intentions with sharing personal narrative in this book?

Stephanie (20:54):

Well I think Bear is a storyteller and this is what they do. They describe themselves as a storyteller. They talk extensively about how, as a Jewish person, they're drawn to storytelling. Jews, we have a storytelling culture. So much about Jewish culture, especially Jewish culture that's divorced from ethnonationalism, is about telling stories about ourselves, stories about our relatives, stories about our culture, stories about our past, every single aspect of Jewish culture is story based. We retell stories as ritual. We engage in storytelling as ritual. We engage in storytelling in particular ways as community connection and to build familiarity amongst each other.

Stephanie (21:36):

And so this is part of what Bear does as a storyteller and as a performer, is they tell their own stories and they tell them again to portray their perspective as a person who was a butch and then was a trans masculine person and now is like a gender faggy dad. And they storytell through their lens to show their possibilities and to share themselves with the world. And really as part of the Jewish culture of storytelling, to put cultural reverence and identity reverence and personal reverence onto the importance of their story. And also as trans people, we recognize that one of the best ways to stake a permanent claim to yourself is to be able to tell your story coherently and in as many places as possible. We see so frequently, even in 2020 and frequently, we see when trans people have violence done to us or when trans people are murdered, our stories are all often lost. We're often misgendered in the press, we're misgendered by medical documents or in police reports.

Stephanie (22:54):

And there's this concept called necropolitics, which for folks who don't know who might be listening, necropolitics is the idea that the state controls and the state's systems of power control, not just how one is able to live, but the manners in which one is able to die and experience death. And trans people experience social death and necropolitical death in particularly unique ways. We're a unique population of people that are dying because we are, by and large, a community of folks who have used our lives to tell a story that we want to say about ourselves that's different than the story that other people want to tell about us. And different in a fundamental way.

Stephanie (23:40):

And when people are killed and misgendered in the media or dead named in the media, often a task that falls to their immediate community is the task of retelling their story and reclaiming their narrative. And pushing back against these necropolitical forces that are trying to force a narrative of cisness, a narrative of criminalization, a narrative of freakishness on to trans bodies and saying, "No, this person had a name. This was this person's gender. This is what their life was. X, Y, and Z." And I always find trans storytelling to be particularly important because the way that we can guarantee the existence of our narrative, and the prominence of our narrative when we die is to tell it ourselves and tell it loudly.

Stephanie (24:32):

And this is why you see so many trans people talking about themselves. This is why you see so many trans people being storytellers and making art and doing poetry and writing songs about themselves and about their experience. We all know at any time we could be murdered for being trans. And in order to keep our truths alive after us, in order to stave off a social death or a total death where our story and our body is lost, that we have to tell our story in as many ways as we can and put it out there loudly, put it out there proudly, and put our mark on it so that it's identifiably and unquestionably our story.

Stephanie (25:13):

And I don't necessarily think Bear is trying to say, like, "Tell your story before you die." But I think part of what Bear's writing means to me is an example that I can really relate to in the long tradition of trans storytelling and in the long tradition of Jewish storytelling, and storytelling about one's self and one's own life, in a way that marks your identity and your presence and your work as undeniably yours.

Page (25:39):

Is there a question that you want to answer about, I'm thinking of like houses in New York City and that larger history, I'm thinking about also the ways that Black and indigenous folks have not been able to have fit family in this heteronormative way.

Stephanie (25:58):

Familial structure in the book isn't explored in the same way as Black and indigenous cultural imaginings of family, or even ballroom imaginings of family or reimagining of family. It's in the same universe of queer and trans familial happening and familial construction, but it's telling a different part of that story. The common thread in those narratives is rejection by cis heteronormative society and a construction of an alternative family that rejects all of the bases of biological family. And I think part of the story that Bear is telling is saying, "Look, you can have that family and you should have that family if you want it, and go and make it as big and gay and slutty and weird as you want."

Stephanie (26:47):

And also these uncomfortable connections that you maintain with your biological family can be part of your larger familial structure. And I think that's the part that's removed from the other kinds of families that we're talking about. And most people in what we think of as more mainstream representations of queer familial structures, don't have any connection with anybody that they're blood related to. And they're sisters of the people they grew up with on the streets and their mothers and fathers are their house mothers and fathers, or their community leaders, or their elders from their organizing groups. Bear has a very extensive, very, very extensive queer family, full of those exact same kinds of connections. And also they go visit their grandmother in Florida and also their parents were at their wedding and also they have a kid.

Monica (27:34):

My question is also around the structure of the book. So this book is essays by Bear, several essays. What is your opinion on why they might have chose to do an essay format versus just writing a memoir, writing a straight shot book?

Stephanie (27:52):

My sense is very much that this is just how they write. They're writing in stories. And instead of telling one larger story about their life, they choose to tell a series of smaller stories to convey more, to tell more stories, because they're a storyteller. They don't want to write a memoir because they're writing a memoir just in several volumes of stories about themselves. And also the genre of memoir doesn't really suit people whose lives need so much explanation. Generally, when you think about memoirs it's, "This person was X, Y, Z, and this is all the neat shit that they did." Or, "This is this one particular interesting interaction or time period in their lives." And it's usually not, "This person has had like six genders and four different names and like has lived 20 different places and has several families of various queer connection and breadth that are now all one family."

Stephanie (28:50):

I mean, that would be the whole book. The whole book would just be explaining the familial structure itself. And so I think just for the stories that they're trying to tell, it's much easier to just

say, "This is my life. These are my people. This is the story that I'm telling." And tell it in snippets rather than try to construct a single coherent narrative out of a life that in many ways was built to defy traditional narratives of coherence. It's hard to tell a big complex story in a memoir. Some parts have to get sanded down to fit within page limits and story coherence and a plot line or whatever. And when you write a book of essays or when you write a series of short like micros essays, like the voter guide, you can tell a larger story about what's going on and not have to commit yourself to one narrative throughout.

Stephanie (29:36):

One of the most important things that I also take away from Bear and their writing and the way that their writing has influenced mine is that as marginalized people and as multiply marginalized people, one of the best tools that we have is our own joy, and part of that joy is laughter. And the way that power and the state and systems of power and control overall keep us oppressed is by denying us joy and by forcing us to take them seriously and see them as not only just the existential threat that they are, but as something that can rob our lives of uniqueness and of happiness and of culture. And one of the ways that I believe that we can fight back against systems of power and control broadly is to recognize them and to laugh at their absurdity.

Stephanie (30:25):

The thing about voting is that you see it every presidential election, people take it so seriously. So seriously. Everybody has a giant stick up their ass about voting. And you aren't allowed to make fun of it at all. It seems like everybody's on one side or another about you have to vote, you have to vote, it's the most important thing that you can do, it's an essential tool in the toolbox. Go out and vote. Don't criticize the candidates, even if you hate them. And also fuck everybody. The whole system is rigged. Elections don't count, my vote doesn't matter. You're a sell out, don't vote. Voting is betraying the movement. And those are the two perspectives that you hear.

Stephanie (31:05):

And what I'm really trying to bring is a third perspective, not to risk being in the ignominious group of people who bring third perspectives to tried and true binaries. I sort of see it as a "yes, and" for both of those. Yeah, you should vote because it's easy and it doesn't take that much time if you have somebody else do the work for you, which is what I do to an extent. And sometimes your vote really does fucking matter, like in the case of judicial retention and in the case of the fair tax, your vote really matters. And also if all you're doing is voting, you're not doing anything. And yes, we're upholding an imperialist, settler, colonialist, white supremacist, transphobic, et cetera, et cetera system. And not voting doesn't dismantle that system anymore than voting does.

Stephanie (31:51):

Whether you participate or not, the system's still going to be there tomorrow, unless we all rise up today. And you don't gain anything by not participating and you don't gain anything by participating either, but you stand to lose quite a bit more if your lack of participation leads to an... And not even necessarily leads to as in it's your fault, but leads to, as in you didn't participate and now the system has made a shitty choice for you and you have to live with that shitty choice. I would rather we participate and still struggle than forfeit our participation and have to live with the consequences of somebody else's bad decision anyway. And we're seeing this with Lori Lightfoot right now. A whole ton of us voted for Toni Preckwinkle. And we could have had the school teacher. We could have had the school teacher.

Page (32:37):

So what has been your main takeaway and influence from reading this?

Stephanie (32:41):

Yeah I think, and this is true in a lot of Bear's writings, is one of the central takeaways from *Blood, Marriage, Wine & Glitter* is it's story after story about joy and resilience and memory and connection and just love and softness within a familial context and also within a personal context and spread out over stories from many years of their life. And those are all things that we really fucking need right now, because it's not a single narrative, I can't tell one story about it, but as a collection of essays, I think that this is the kind of radical imagining and radical telling of something that's already been imagined and happened, of connection and family and interpersonal relation that we need to see and absorb as many perspectives as we can on. Because these are the kind of relationships, these are the kinds of structures that we're going to need to build the world we all want.

Stephanie (33:40):

And just the way of being kind to each other and building connections across difference and difficulty and generations and space and time are things that folks are both really good at and really fucking bad at right now. We're really good at shitting on each other when disagreement happens. And I think there hasn't been enough time spent on intentional relationship building an intentional coalition building outside of everybody's individual ideological bubble, and individual immediate bubble. And for me, every story about queer family and every story about trans family is a story of coalition building, just coalition building with much more personal stakes. Time and time and time again, in this book and in their other writings, Bear tells stories that don't even have to imagine that kind of beautiful, radical acts of community love, because they're already told about in the book, they're already spoken about, they're preexisting, they're just there. And I think we all have a lot to learn from that. And even if it's stuff that we already knew, we have a lot to reabsorb from it.

Monica (34:45):

Well, thank you so much, Stephanie, for taking time to talk with us about this book. Again, it's called *Blood, Marriage, Wine & Glitter* by Bear Bergman. And I'm really stoked to share this book with people that I know in my life, especially Jewish trans people in my life that I think would appreciate this book. And also just like everybody should read this book, including myself. As we reach the end of our episode, I also did want to say, because this episode is going to be coming out, I believe the night before election day. I do want to ask, if someone is listening right now that it is still on the fence about going out to vote, what would you say to them to convince them to go out tomorrow to vote and then organize the following day?

Page (35:32):

No pressure.

Stephanie (35:36):

The night before election day, it's too late to vote early. So buy a hazmat suit and put on some gloves and a mask and like go out really early, wait in line and vote. Yes, I know it sucks. Yes, I know there's a whole ton of corruption in Chicago and Cook County. Yes. I know the United States is a corrupt, capitalist, white supremacist, transphobic, colonial empire. We know. We get it. We know. On your ballot in Illinois and in Chicago right now, you have the ability to pass a reform to the state's tax bracket that will allow us to take money from millionaires and billionaires and use it to fund schools and get rid of the state's deficit. It won't solve the problem by itself, but I know all of us are into taxing billionaires and taking money from rich people.

Stephanie (36:21):

So you literally have the ability to go out and vote to do that. And if that's not enough, if making a reform to a tax code isn't sexy enough, there are truly terrible people in Cook County who have immense power by virtue of being judges. And we have the ability, we have the privilege of being able to choose them and tell them whether or not they keep their jobs. Every six years judges are up for retention. Every year, judges are up for retention, but it's cycles. Every judge has a six year retention term. And there are some fucked up people on the ballot. There's [Tuman 00:36:58], who is so bad that the Cook County Democratic Party is actively campaigning against him. I've seen Jan Schakowsky's face in more ads against Tuman's retention than I have in ads for her own campaign.

Page (37:11):

He was keeping young people, he turned JTDC, he was just detaining young people well beyond what they had been sentenced to under COVID.

Stephanie (37:20):

There are people on the ballot right now for judicial retention who lock up children, who are horrible to sexual assault survivors, who are racists, who are white supremacists, who were

campaign managers against Harold Washington in the '80s. And we literally have the ability to make them lose their job. It's not hard. Judicial retention requires 60% of the vote for those judges to keep their job. If these judges get 59% of the vote, they lose their job. If they get 59.9% of the vote, they lose their job. We have the ability to make fundamental changes to the carceral system in Cook County just by voting out horrible judges. And that is an opportunity that we as abolitionists and we as radicals cannot pass up.

Stephanie (38:08):

The things we're literally out in the streets protesting to do every single day, we have the ability to do that with a vote. And to not vote in that... If you go and you only vote for judges... Also, please vote for the fair tax, because if you don't vote for it, it might be construed as a vote against it because constitutional amendments are weird. But even if you only go out and vote for judges, you are making a difference that we are trying to make every day on the streets. Voting against racist judges, voting against asshole judges in general, is an act of abolition. And that's something we all believe in. And one of the tools we have in our toolbox is telling these judges that they don't get to be judges anymore by voting. And we all have to go out and do that. It is our job as abolitionists to get rid of these judges and to change the system any way we can, until we can tear it down completely.

Monica (38:54):

That's right. Absolutely. You hear that everybody? So if you don't go out and vote, I believe on Tuesday, November 3rd, then you are going to be hearing from Stephanie, from Page, and from Monica. We're coming for you. Thank you so much again, Stephanie, for being on the show and for talking with us. Can you close us out, bringing it back to the theme of joy, and because sometimes voting is the opposite of joy. Can you close us out with a favorite passage from this book?

Stephanie (39:28):

Yes. So this is a passage from a chapter called Machatunim, which is a Yiddish word that's explored in the passage. The context is Bear is talking about their grandma aging and experiencing the effects of aging and going through some signs of dementia and Bear visiting them and hearing about their health in Florida and how they were dealing with their own reactions to their grandma's health and the changes in her wellbeing by wanting to reach out to one of their friends. And they're talking to their friend, Ivan, who was having a similar experience. And Ivan was talking about their grandparents.

Stephanie (40:15):

"So when her little grand Florence passed two summers ago, Ivan talked and told stories about her for months. I got three different phone calls that summer that started out to be about business and ended up to be about her gram. My husband and I had just gotten married and he was pregnant with our son. Ivan and I talked a lot about our families all summer long and in the late

fall too, when we were on tour down the West Coast and each night, the onstage patter deepened into a cyclical groove of celebration, her little gram just passed and my son soon to come.

Stephanie (40:47):

We made audiences cry from San Francisco to Victoria, British Columbia, telling all kinds of family stories, butch and fem and trans and queer. Blood and marriage and not marriage at all. And I remembered that it was Ivan's story about her aunt, Kathy, girlfriend of one of her many uncles and no actual legal relation in any way at all that made me explain during one long car ride about Machatunim. It's a Yiddish word, sometimes translated as co in-laws, as in your kid's spouse's parents. And it's been used my whole childhood to indicate all those people to whom one is not actually related directly, but who are definitely family like it or not.

Stephanie (41:27):

Your brother's wife's sister, your former stepmother no longer married to your dad, but still beloved by you, and her new husband. Your favorite cousin's lovers, all three of them, your sister's wife's brace of great aunties, the child you helped parent for the five years you were lovers with her dad, your uncle's ex-girlfriend from two decades ago, Machatunim, all of them. It helps to have a word for it I find, especially when someone asks if you're family, and you're not sure if you are or not in their definition of the word, which might be a little more conservative than yours. You say, well, he's Machatunum.”

[OUTRO music fades in]

Page (42:34):

Thanks so much for listening to another episode of The Lit Review, a podcast where we interview people we love and respect about books to help grow our movement. We are your co-hosts, Monica Trinidad and Page May, two Chicago based abolitionist organizers. We'll be back next week with another episode next Sunday, same time, same place. Want to learn about a specific book? Email us your suggestions at thelitreviewchicago@gmail.com or find us on Facebook. And if you like this episode, give it a shout out on Twitter or Instagram. Our handle is [@litreviewchi](https://www.instagram.com/litreviewchi). Financial support for the production of this podcast is thanks to our amazing Patreon subscribers. Learn more about becoming a Patron at patreon.com/thelitreview. Keep reading!