

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Professor Jen Manion

JVN [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Professor Jen Manion, where I'm asking: How resilient were history's "female husbands"?

Welcome to Getting Curious, I'm Jonathan Van Ness. And every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Professor Jen Manion, where I'm asking: How resilient were history's female husbands? Welcome to Getting Curious. This is Jonathan Van Ness. We have got a scintillating episode of Getting Curious for you. Let's introduce our guest. Welcome Jen Manion, who is a professor of history and sexuality, women's and gender studies at Amherst College.

And then Getting Curious audience, I did give Jen fair warning on this right before we started recording, and I said I'm just gonna, like, willingly break my new journalistic rule where I try not to compliment people's looks. But you are giving me, like, volume. You're giving me body on this hair. The way that your hair is, just, like, the texture and how it is, like, sitting atop your head. It's almost giving me, like, Tan France at the beginning of Queer Eye, like, because he was, like, a little bit more salt and pepper then and now, like, Tan is more, like, a little more silvery. So you're giving me Tan a la 2017 and I'm living for it. I'm absolutely living. So let's, let's get in here. First of all, how are you?

JEN MANION [00:01:13] I'm great. It's great to be with you.

JVN [00:01:16] We are so excited that you're here. So basically, here's the thing: in my research for Getting Curious the TV show, some of our producers and I, we stumbled upon the term in history "female husbands." And we were, like, "female husbands is giving community in the day, honey. Female husbands is giving, 'we are not new.' Female husbands is giving ferocity that I am very curious about." So can you help us set the scene: where and when does this female husbands story begin?

JEN MANION [00:01:52] It begins in 1746 in Somerset, England, and Charles Hamilton and Mary Creed get married. Now Charles Hamilton was a quack doctor and they traveled around selling ointments and cures. And after about two months of marriage, Mary kind of freaked out and ran to the authorities and said, you know, "My husband is a woman." And so Mary makes a sworn testimony with the authorities, saying, "I married my husband, believing that they were a man and we had sex. And now I think my husband is a woman and I want to get out of this." And so the authorities really rally around Mary and want to protect her and believe her, and Charles Hamilton, it turns out, was someone who was assigned female at birth and when they were a teenager, they transed gender and they began living as a man and they

were convicted, you know, of deception and fraud and vagrancy and sentenced to six months of imprisonment at hard labor. And they were also publicly whipped in four different towns where they were known to have lived. Charles Hamilton's life becomes the basis for a fictionalized version of it that Henry Fielding wrote that was also published in 1746 called "The Female Husband." And so that's the beginning of the wide circulation of this term used to describe people.

JVN [00:03:34] Is the criteria for, like, being considered like a quote, "female husband" in history, like, having been caught in what appeared to be a cishet marriage, but then, like, the one who is the man ended up being assigned female at birth?

JEN MANION [00:03:48] Yeah.

JVN [00:03:49] There's a lot to unpack there. There's a lot of echoes of current trans violence. It's giving Roanoke. It's giving Nina, Maria, and the Pinta. Pinto? What was that third ship? Nina, Maria-, Piña! No, I can't remember, it's, like, some name, but the point is, but it's giving, like, really old. Like, I mean, 1700s, it's, like, a hot minute ago. So when we think about the seventeenth hundreds, which, you know, speaking of Roanoke, watch me be a journalist, honey, what are the challenges of documenting historical subjects?

JEN MANION [00:04:26] What aren't the challenges? I mean, you know, we historians rely on archives, you know, so there has to be some piece of evidence or proof to support what you think is happening. And most records are of institutions or, you know, of-, if they're family papers, they're usually of, you know, rich, famous, and powerful people. So we know a lot about those people and we know a lot about politicians and governments. But when it comes to learning about ordinary people, we usually have to rely on the words of others. So, you know, "What did this police report say? What did this jail report say about someone?" And those are incredibly biased sources. But when it comes to LGBTQ people, like, they're often the only kind of things that we have because people will get caught up in the system and arrested for, you know, having gay sex or transing gender. One of the main ways historians have learned about them in the past is through police and court and prison records.

JVN [00:05:37] I have so many questions. One. Did I just hear you say because they were "transing genders"? That's fucking cool. Is that, like, how historians refer to, like, trans issues in the past, if the way that they referred to them in the time was, like, really fucking derogatory and fucked up? And it's, like, convenient because it represents, like, both ways, you don't have to say, like, "This to that." It's just, like, "They were transing gender." So it's, like, a more fierce, easier way?

JEN MANION [00:06:06] Yes.

JVN [00:06:07] It's giving Meryl Streep and J-Lo in that GIF when they, like, stand up clapping. I-, OK, give it to me. Did you invent that? Or who invented that?

JEN MANION [00:06:19] Susan Stryker, one of the pioneer historians and transgender study scholars and a couple other people, you know, have been using it in their work now. And the other thing that it does is it allows us to talk about people from the past without assuming or presuming that they understood their identities in the same way that you or I might today. So we're saying, "They did this thing. There's a lot of overlap, you know, between their experiences and our experiences, but I'm not going to put them in this box and say, 'They identified as transgender,' but they did trans gender."

JVN [00:06:58] Have we found any cool, like, old manuscripts, like, manage to like, make it through or, like, any, like, queer stories that, like, was in a box that, like, some cool queer person in the 1800s, like, passed down to, like, their second cousin, who then gave it to someone else and it's, like, okay, like, it's preserved? No, I'm guessing by your face. It's not. So no manuscripts. No old books.

JEN MANION [00:07:18] The television show "Gentleman Jack," that's based on the diaries and life of Anne Lister is an example of a queer person from the past, and they're one of the earliest, like, people who actually did leave diaries, they were heavily coded, and so some people have really worked to decode them to find the references to her sex and her love and her relationships. And, you know, people really claim Anne Lister as a lesbian, which makes sense, but they were also gender nonconforming. So for me, they're, like, one of the earliest queer ancestors. So they lived in the 1800s and they have left thousands of pages of diary records. So that's one, that's why they're so special, because they're one of the few people that we get to learn about their life in their own voice and not through police reports and court records and all that kind of stuff.

JVN [00:08:21] Do you know anything about, like, that coding? Like, was there any, like, hot and, like, gorgeous queer stuff in there, just, like, what's the most controversial thing she said? Was that, like, was she, like, "The breasts in the corset just bouncing a-louncing all over the place? I wanted to bury my, you know, face in them," or something. What did it say?

JEN MANION [00:08:44] Yeah, it's great. It's great.

JVN [00:08:46] I guess I'll have to watch the series. Yes, I, I have no good excuse for not having watched that like I probably was just bingeing British Bake Off and I need to watch more queer historical content. OK, so then the other thing I was thinking is , when we think about this source material about these police records and in the story of Charles Hamilton, even the story of Gentleman Jack. How should we be approaching these materials? You know, before we get even deeper in?

JEN MANION [00:09:14] Yeah, it's a, it's a really important question, and, you know, language and categories are really important to us now, you know, in our own lives and really in queer history. And so I think, you know, it's important for us to learn about these histories like we

deserve to have queer and trans transcestors, too. But the world was also so different, you know, 100, 200 years ago. So it's not necessarily helpful or accurate for us to think about these people as being exactly the same as us. You know, in terms of how they understood themselves or how other people viewed them. So, you know, one of the key ideas in the history of sexuality as a field is that, you know, homosexuality, as an identity, as, as something that is interior to oneself was really invented at the end of the 19th century.

So that prior to that, people might engage in same-sex sex, and it was a sin, and it was a crime. But it didn't mean that you were a distinct kind of person because you did it. And that's one reason why punishment was taken so seriously because they wanted to set an example to deter other people from doing it, and they wanted to try to convince you to stop doing it. So that is a major turning point in how we think about most histories of gender and sexuality in the late 19th, early 20th century. Everything sort of changed and got codified into one's sense of self; that, "This is now not just something I do, this is my identity." And so I think for people like us looking back. It's great to be curious and also a little bit humble, you know, in terms of how much can we really know and connect the dots between ourselves and these people.

JVN [00:11:30] So what are some ways people assigned female could live as men in a time when it wasn't, like, definitely not the norm. And also, like, not safe and you, if you were to be caught, you could be threatened with because, you know, that first story that we were talking about with Charles Hamilton and Ann. Like, I bet she did know, and they were just, like, gorgeous lovers, and then maybe Charles cheated on her. Maybe Charles cheated on her with the neighbor, and then Anne was like, "You fucking slut. I'm fucking turning you in! You fucking bitch, you ruined our lives!" You know, and then maybe afterwards she was, like, maybe, like, the second city, like, and was like, "I went too far. Like, I'm so sorry!" You really? Or do you think they're right? I don't think that's probably more likely. That's what it's giving me. [CROSSTALK] Or no? Do we know?

JEN MANION [00:12:30] No, I love it. I love it. We don't know. We'll never know. I mean, I think that's definitely the case in some of the other relationships. Absolutely.

JVN [00:12:39] We need juicy details on some of, well, actually, I'm being professional. What are some of the ways people assigned female could live as men?

JEN MANION [00:12:49] Well, everyone who is a female husband, you know, was a laborer. So it's really a working class category. And as long as one adopted manhood that was consistent with, like, you know, white, working class manhood of their time and place where they lived, they had a whole world of occupations open to them that had previously been denied. So the key was, you know, transing gender, you know, fixing your hair, fixing your clothes, thinking about all the, the clues, you know, the codes, the signals for manhood that were relevant in your community and making sure that you were doing them. And then people, you know, worked as servants. They worked as tinkers and tin makers, they ran taverns, there were a lot

of bartenders, there were shipwrights, you know, just a whole world of, you know, laboring occupations that a lot of female husbands and other people assigned female, too, who weren't husbands had access to. There were a lot of sailors. That was another common thing in the 19th century because the maritime industry was just so huge and it was an easy thing. You know, there was always a shortage of people to go to sea, and they were often teenagers and people who trans gendered were also often teenagers. So you could easily get hired as a ship hand.

JVN [00:14:28] So it's just like basically another reason of like it's just like further evidence of, like, how off base J.K. Rowling is as well, because we've been having, like, stunning, transing masc-presenting people for literally hundreds of years. Not that it's funny, but I just sidebar, did you see her fucking nightmare tweet? And then did you see Tinashe be, like, "Girl, shut up"? It was like the best tweet I've seen. It was, like, really viral. It was really funny, and it makes you want to stream Tinashe now. So with— I hear you saying that it was, like, a lot of working class people, you know, needed to conform to the clues and, like, the expressions of the people of their time. One person that comes up for me or one issue that comes up for me is, like, family. And, like, if you came up in a community where people, you know, knew you as someone who was assigned female at birth, you know, or was, like, living as living as female. When you can just say that, how do we want to say that as respectfully as how do we say that as, like, if you're like, like, was living as female, is that how we are supposed to say it? No? Yes?

JEN MANION [00:15:41] Yes, well, you know, it's yeah, I say a lot of times they say that they were raised as girls.

JVN [00:15:47] Yes, yes, I like that.

JEN MANION [00:15:50] So they didn't get to control that.

JVN [00:15:52] Right, 100 percent.

JEN MANION [00:15:53] And then as soon as they had freedom and autonomy, they broke away from that and changed it.

JVN [00:15:59] But was that a challenge, like, was, like, when families ever, like, come looking for them because they like they were like runaways or kidnapped or something? And then they would they come out them in their new life?

JEN MANION [00:16:10] For the most part, no. So a lot of people, a lot of the records that I know about, people were, you know, their parents had died or they, they were poor people. A case that I love that there are a lot of records about was James Howe from London in 1766 and both James Howe and Mary Snapes, who became their wife, they were both put out as children, like, to be servants in other people's homes because their families couldn't provide

for them. So, you know, it's There's a lot of financial hardship in these lives. And in the case of other people, you know, they ran away, like, people left home, like, so, so no one stayed in the community that they grew up in and were raised in and transed gender and, you know, lived as a man. There's a tremendous amount of movement and mobility for every one of these people.

JVN [00:17:14] And then what other challenges could, like, inform someone who is transing gender being outed in these times. If it wasn't family, was it always a romantic partner, was it, like, what was it?

JEN MANION [00:17:33] Yeah. So, you, you really had to, like, be seen as a man. And so there's a lot of work involved, right, in making sure that you're hitting all the notes and not raising people's suspicions that you might be someone who's assigned female. So another case is an example of someone's wife who turned on them, right? So there's a couple. So Henry Stokes' wife felt like Henry was treating her badly, right, and, and taking advantage of her, not giving her enough allowance to buy things, and also said that Henry was abusive. And Henry had a successful bricklaying business in Manchester, England, in 1838. And so when Ann wanted a divorce, and was, like, "I've had it with you." She went to a lawyer and outed her husband to the lawyer to try to get a divorce. And to get a divorce on more favorable terms. And said, "I'm not married to a man. I'm married to a woman." The reports in the press were very sympathetic towards Anne. You know that her husband was a terrible person who mistreated her and, you know, should give her the house and some property and, you know, more than they were initially willing to do. So it was fascinating. I mean, people, really, the state really rallies around the wives to protect the wives against their husbands. So it seems like, I mean, it definitely worked out for her. Henry got run out of town, but comes back into our frame a few decades later, having remarried and, you know, running a beer house with another woman, so people persist.

JVN [00:19:20] So what year?

JEN MANION [00:19:22] So that was 1859. So 20 years later. And we learn about Henry this time, tragically, because they died. Their body was found floating in a river under suspicious circumstances.

JVN [00:19:34] Oh, fuck. Was the wife devastated?

JEN MANION [00:19:39] Yes, definitely.

JVN [00:19:41] Oh, thank god. So, at least, so at least Henry found love. Maybe?

JEN MANION [00:19:46] Yeah! And, and adopted the wife's son from another marriage, and they had what seems like a beautiful family and a strong community together. And it's, it's a wonderful story. You know, until it's not.

JVN [00:20:04] What other stories!

JEN MANION [00:20:07] Well, one of my favorites is the first case that I know about in the US, which was in New York City in 1836. And this happens because George Wilson, this particular female husband, was out partying after work and had too much to drink and was passed out on the street and a policeman came across them and picked them up and took them into the station. And this began a process of interrogation in which the policemen felt like he realized or decided that George Wilson was not really a man. But in the course of this interrogation, Wilson's wife shows up to the police station, we realize that they're a couple who met in Glasgow, Scotland, again, as laborers who came over to the U.S. in the 1820s, 1830s, I think the 1820s, we don't know exactly. And traveled and worked, and at this time they were living in the Lower East Side. Wilson was working, making hats. We don't know what Elizabeth did for work, but she surely was probably also working in a factory. And in this situation, the police wants to know, you know, "When did you find out that your husband was not a man?" is basically the line of inquiry and she says, and you know, I don't know if this is true or not. She says that she believes her husband was a man until they were on the ship coming to America, and then George told her that George was assigned female at birth, and that Elizabeth at that point didn't have a choice, really, but also didn't care and loved them, and they were happy, lived happily ever after as like husband and wife for 15 years before this incident.

JVN [00:22:18] So then what happened?

JEN MANION [00:22:20] So the record stops, so we hope that they were released because there was no law against cross-dressing and, and they really didn't do anything wrong, and their wife came to the station to pick them up, and you know, they were subject to interrogation, potentially a physical investigation, which is alluded to, which is terrible and shouldn't happen to anyone. But then I think we have reason to believe that they were just let go, which was often the case because they really hadn't done anything illegal.

JVN [00:23:01] How did you, as a scholar, start to, like, find these stories?

JEN MANION [00:23:08] Well, they're in newspapers. I mean, old newspapers are amazing. And it used to be that you would sit in an archive with one issue of one paper and flip the pages and you could spend, what, an hour or two just reading one day's paper. But now old newspapers have been digitized, and a lot of them are available for free online through, you know, different websites, including the Library of Congress has, like, a phenomenal digital newspaper collection for the whole country, for, you know, hundreds of years. And so you can search keywords and, and then just see, "Oh, there were 30 or 100 different newspaper articles about George Wilson in 1836."

JVN [00:24:00] How many, in 1836?

JEN MANION [00:24:01] Oh, hundreds.

JVN [00:24:03] So this George Wilson story was everywhere.

JEN MANION [00:24:06] They were all, this is why it's so amazing, because it's not just that George Wilson got arrested and this happened. The local press reported on it. But then it was, like, exciting news.

JVN [00:24:18] But then it just stopped? And we have no idea what happened with one hundred and thirty something articles. Da fuck?! So they just was, like, "Oh, this happened," but then there is nothing of, like, at the end of the articles, was he still in jail?

JEN MANION [00:24:31] Yes.

JVN [00:24:32] So it didn't say that they let the wife take him home.

JEN MANION [00:24:34] No.

JVN [00:24:35] But there's no record in the press of them being flogged or something.

JEN MANION [00:24:39] Exactly, and you know, the, the actual police records for this time and court records haven't survived. So I went to the New York City archives to try to track down a different set of records that would verify some of this, and they just, they don't exist. So we really don't know.

JVN [00:25:01] So, the partners of the female husbands. I'm imagining that there would be, like, a spectrum of different type of people and like, you know, maybe, like, lovers' scorned. like, or like what? who were some of the stories of the people who these female husbands were married to?

JEN MANION [00:25:20] The female husbands their spouses didn't have like, you know, a similarly catchy category.

JVN [00:25:27] Sexy ladies from, like, the past?

JEN MANION [00:25:32] Sexy ladies from the past! I've been calling them queer wives.

JVN [00:25:35] Oh, yeah, queer wives. That's better.

JEN MANION [00:25:41] You know, people, people living at the time when they lived and, you know, want us to think that they were all straight women who were duped.

JVN [00:26:52] Oh, so no one was proud?!

JEN MANION [00:26:55] No, they definitely were proud, so I think James Howe's wife Mary was proud. They, they did this together, so there they were, both raised as girls and they decided to get married and they decided together that James would transition and live as a man, and they ran a pub for 30 years. [CROSSTALK] In partnership. So I think that's an example of a queer wife who said, "This is, I'm down for this. This is awesome. This is better than any life that I thought it was going to have." And, you know, so that's one example. Another example, a person called Miss Lewis from Syracuse. In 1856, she married Albert Guelph and her father hated the marriage and did not like Guelph and wanted to, you know, break them up and destroy it, and said he thought something was different about Guelph and, you know, reported them to the authorities. And, and Guelph got arrested and detained, and Miss Lewis was in prison every day visiting by their side. You know, "I love Albert. I'm their wife. You know, this is what I want, you know, stay out of my life, dad," you know, that kind of thing.

JVN [00:27:17] Was he okay? Guelph?

JEN MANION [00:27:20] Well, Guelph was awesome because Guelph had maybe a little more resources than some of these other husbands and hired a lawyer who claimed, "There's no law against cross-dressing. So I have done nothing wrong and you have no basis for detaining me." And the judge agrees and says, "You're right, we can't continue for 90 days. The longest we can detain you is for 60 days," which was the common term used to detain vagrants and vagrancy charges were just thrown around like candy. So then they got released after 60 days.

JVN [00:28:57] And then did they, cause, cause at some point, masquerade laws do come into effect, at least in parts of the country.

JEN MANION [00:28:06] Yes. So they start. So I mean, but that was what's interesting. New York has one of the earliest ones, 1845. But what Guelph's lawyer proved in court was that even that law. That was not meant to apply to people cross-dressing, that was a reaction to the anti-rent protests and people who were masquerading in other ways over, you know, land and property disputes, that was never meant to apply to people like Guelph, and the judge agreed. Now as time goes on, judges don't agree with that, and they do apply it to other people who trans gender and cross-dress and, you know, ball culture and things like this in the late 19th century. Absolutely. But it is interesting that in the early years, there's just, you know, a feeling.

JVN [00:29:07] So this bigotry had to be weaponized and grown and developed.

JEN MANION [00:29:10] Absolutely.

JVN [00:29:12] But the bones have always been there. So that's really fascinating. What networks of community or solidarity did these individuals form or was there any like or were

those kind of whispers when people had read about it in the paper? Because I would also suppose that much like a bad Yelp review, like, a negative experience or a bad experience, like someone being outed or being caught or whatever, you know, outed, caught. I mean, that is what happened, but I just hate that it even has to be said like that. But it's like those ended up in the paper, but there's probably lots of. You know, community and like, there's probably like people that maybe just didn't get caught up in the law, maybe they just stayed out of trouble, and that's even another thing that's hard to document. They're going on because they didn't want to be found.

JEN MANION [00:30:00] I hope so, I believe so. You know, But you're right, I mean, we only learn about people because they're having a hard time and somebody has found them and doesn't want to let them live in peace. The only upside of that that I would say is you could imagine. I mean, I think about this, speak for myself because I found this, you know, this one story about Henry Stoke from 1838 was printed in the small town paper where I grew up, which was Pottsville, Pennsylvania. So it's a small, rural mining town that had just gotten established and just created a newspaper. And the story of Henry Stoke from, you know, thousands of miles away was in this: my little small town newspaper. And so I think, "Oh my God, I could read about this," you know, it's a terrible thing that happened to them, but that I could even as a kid in 1838, read about this and say, "Oh my God, there are other people like me. This is something that I could do." So even when they're negative stories, it still connects people and inspires people. And you can imagine if you live nearby or in that region that you could reach out to that person or that couple and form community.

JVN [00:31:21] Ah! OK wait, was there ever a story of, like, where the queer wife was also transing gender?

JEN MANION [00:31:32] So I don't have evidence of that. That is an accusation that gets thrown sometimes as a way to de-, ruin her credibility as well as her husband's. But I don't have evidence of that.

JVN [00:31:48] Nothing like a little bit of transmisogyny to sprinkle in the history of our queer wives. OK, I just wanted there to be some fierce, like, transing gender, like femme queens who are just like really giving like, I don't know, Jonathan, what is your problem today? OK, so then OK, when does the term female husband start to fall out of use?

JEN MANION [00:32:13] In the 20th century.

JVN [00:32:14] Why?

JEN MANION [00:32:15] Early 20th century. So I think there are a lot of reasons. You know, it's really an 18th century term. So the fact that it carried on and was used for as long as it was is kind of remarkable. It was popular in the UK. It really peaked, you know, between 1820 and 1850. And then it gets picked up in the U.S. a little bit later. So 1870 to 1890. And the US

press was never as in love with the female husbands as the UK was. The stories are shorter, they're meaner, they're less, less emphasis on gender. You know, like the UK, husbands really get celebrated. Like, "It's amazing that you were able to do this. This is really interesting. Wow." And, you know, by the late 19th century in the US, it's kind of there's, like, open hostility in these stories.

JVN [00:33:17] It's like pathologized and villainized.

JEN MANION [00:33:20] And they're basically like, "You're just women trying to do something that a woman is not supposed to do." So it sort of becomes used in that way. And then it's also used in a lot to refer to a lot of different kinds of people. So for the first 150 years it very solidly applied to a white worker who was assigned female, who transed gender, who lived as a man, and married a woman. Period. By the end of the 19th century, it's used to describe lesbians. It's used to describe feminine, cisgender men, and it's often caught up in conversations and reflections about same sex marriage. So it really kind of it starts to emphasize sex and not gender.

JVN [00:34:12] Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

JEN MANION [00:34:18] So I think it just loses its meaning.

JVN [00:34:20] So then what is the significance of that shift? And then what terms and categories come into focus next to, like, diversify the bigotry, from the cishets? Or at least the people in power or whatever.

JEN MANION [00:34:32] Well, it really signals a critique and rejection of transing gender but more space for women to express gender in a wider range of ways. And so it does come out of this moment where there was some success for the women's movement and so women can wear pants, women can have access to education, women are getting closer and closer to the vote—

JVN [00:35:02] Well, white women.

JEN MANION [00:35:03] The white women. Yes. And so the terms that come after this are, well, you know, transvestite was a concept that circulated during this era and that was with a real emphasis on just cross-dressing.

JVN [00:35:27] That was also very popular when I was young. Like, I feel like transvestite was, like, very widely used in rural America in the 1980s, like, it was on TV shows. It was, like, that was, like, a very, like, common, derogatory word to, like, sling around to describe anything around like gender non-conformity or even, like, homosexuality, or, like, femme presenting homosexual people.

JEN MANION [00:35:52] Were you able to see anything positive in it? Or was it always only derogatory?

JVN [00:35:57] No, it was always, like, you know, like, a Jerry Springer-type show or, like, it was always like, you know, sensationalized talk show thing that was very, like, you know, tokenizing and like, dehumanizing. Or it was, like, something that was, like, if I was dressing because I grew up, like always wanting to be in like evening gowns. And wanted to wear, like, my little girl cousins, like clothes and it was like, you know, "Don't be that like, you know, are you a transvestite?" Like that sort of thing? Like, so personally. And I'm like, it was just like a widely used word.

JEN MANION [00:36:34] Yeah, I think in modern times, it's been more used to people who are assigned male. Right. Because I think and because And partly again, because of, like, you know, feminism and just the way gender is policed, that there has been more space for people assigned female to express, you know, masculine gender and, you know, wear men's clothes and not be subjected to, you know, derogatory like harassment.

JVN [00:37:03] Which is, like, also misogyny, because it's, like, the, you know, male is, like, was considered the more powerful, like, fierce thing to be or whatever which is like, I don't understand. You know, and obviously this is before figure skating became so widespread, popular because like, I just, you know, for me coming like, how could you ever look at figures, like, gendered figure skating and think that being the guy was cooler? Like, no offense to male figure skaters, but like, just like the girls I like, all the cooler spins, the better outfits. It's like more graceful hands, like it's just much more fun. So, you know, I digress. But you know. Yeah. So just to say that, like, that's interesting that trans-, the reason why I brought that up is that like, you know, I was born in 1987. So knowing that, like, that the term transvestite starts to come up in the early 1900s, like that was still a term like, I mean, think it's even thrown around today and a lot of like rural, you know, us, it's just like, very like widely used mean absolutely is more typically referred to as people that are assigned male at birth and are, you know, more femme presenting in that way, which is why it was obviously, like, more in my world, you know? But what other terms do you have transvestite, what else?

JEN MANION [00:38:09] Well, homosexual, homosexual. So it's to be sexual and sexual inversion and homosexuality. [CROSSTALK] They, they come out of this era. And so those categories were really assigned to feminine men and masculine women. And so that's one reason why female husbands become less seen as trans figures and more seen as "sexual deviants." And as we know, I mean, that's the root of modern gay identity that hasn't, you know, changed very much. The other term, which is much more 19th century, which, thankfully, we've left behind is "Boston Marriages."

JVN [00:38:51] What's that?

JEN MANION [00:38:52] And so that's it's more of an upper middle and upper class, you know, white woman relationship where you're educated and you live together, and people you and you don't get legally married to anyone. And people would, of course, debate over what was really going on in these relationships. But it was a very socially acceptable category.

JVN [00:39:19] So when we think about the story of female husbands, how do female husbands start to pave the way for trans people today and how they're even perceived in the US and British society? And, I'm putting this all together, what that means for your chances of safety or, like, thriving in society.

JEN MANION [00:39:46] Well, people have always fought for gender freedom for themselves and others in the face of tremendous resistance and barriers and obstacles from family, from doctors, from policing authorities. "This is who we are and we're going to do it anyway." And so what you see from the 18th and 19th century stories about them, well, is that fact that people have been doing this for a very long time, that people can have loving relationships and friendships and be a part of a community. And it can all be awesome, you know, if people would just leave them alone. But then the other thing you see is that these— thinking through, you know, the relationship between sex and gender, you know, the idea that just because you're assigned to sex at birth, what does that have to do with the gender that you're going to embrace? And how are you going to express yourself as a teenager or as an adult?

Well, people have been thinking about that forever. You know, and these newspaper accounts to show the community trying to work through, "OK, well, how did they look? How did they dress? How did they act? Did anybody know was this, you know?" And they're just, they're, and in that process of trying to make sense of this couple, everyone who is reading about these stories is learning, "Oh my God, there's sex and gender aren't the same thing, right?" We can't, we shouldn't assume or force people to live, you know, their gender expression in this one way just because they were assigned a certain sex at birth. And so when you realize that people have been having these conversations in these debates for hundreds of years and what we're doing right now is not new at all. I mean, it actually makes it seem absurd that this is even still a problem in some people's eyes, that trans people aren't just fully, you know, respected and affirmed in accessing health care and employment and identification and just allowed to go on our merry way. It makes modern people seem really retro and out of it and ignorant and, you know, ignorant of our history. Right? And just rigid in a way that even people in the past weren't necessarily.

JVN [00:42:18] So because so often the press has played a big role in, you know, bringing female husbands to the fore, as you know, a group and in society. And then, you know, sometimes playing a huge role in outing them. And then also because we were mentioning earlier that the US press and the British press covered them differently. How do you think that compares to the contemporary media's focus on trans people today across the political spectrum?

JEN MANION [00:42:47] I think it's very similar. I mean, the press uses trans people for headlines in ways that are sometimes, as you mentioned about all the coverage of, you know, transvestites in your childhood, that are really mean and mocking and dehumanizing. And, you know, there's a market for that, I guess. And you know, at the same time, some press is really informative and respectful, and people can really get like a basic education about our community, individual needs, collective struggle. And so it's very important. And you know, it is a little bit ironic in this moment that the UK media establishment is just full on anti-trans. And really violent, unnecessary, ignorant ways. And yet, in my research, the UK press of the late 18th and early 19th century was really curious, really open minded and really saw that there was a difference between sex and gender. And for people who were otherwise, you know, law abiding citizens who had favorable references from their employers and their neighbors that they were, you know, respected.

JVN [00:44:18] Your research is so fascinating and you are so fascinating. What initially drew you to this type of research?

JEN MANION [00:44:27] Well, I fell in love with history in college, but there was so little queer and trans history at all in any of it. And so I carried a chip on my shoulder about that, and I think that was part of what propelled me to go to grad school and say, "You know, I'm going to write more queer and trans history because we're not represented enough in all the history books that we read," and also at that time, even just, you know, poor and working women, I felt like was another category of people that was really important and certainly reflected my life and my family. And that, you know, there's not enough history about them. And so that was what inspired my first project on the origins of the penitentiary, which is really about, you know, poor and working people who get harassed for being poor and put in prison and they're mostly Black and Irish.

So just the power of history to uncover and uplift and tell the stories of people who are really marginalized by society and don't necessarily have as many opportunities, rights, and resources as other people. That's been my driving force, and so the trans project certainly comes from that spirit as well, you know? But the other thing is that, you know, I taught the history of sexuality to college students for over a decade at that point. And we know that the creation of modern gay identity comes in this moment in the early 20th century when gender non-conformity gets fused with homosexuality. And I'm, like, "What about before then?" You know, like, so there's this moment where being a masculine woman means you're gay. What did they think of female masculinity before, you know, the 1890s? Like, because there is a lot of it. When you look at these old newspapers, there's a ton of it, like, people are transing gender left and right like crazy. And like, they weren't necessarily. There's no inherent stigma that says, "Oh, you were also homosexual," like, that got created later. And so I thought there's like a much richer, messier story of gender that is not about sexual orientation in the 18th and 19th century. So we need to know more about and that's where I found the female husbands.

JVN [00:46:59] Mm hmm. Was there ever anyone from that time who was, like, transing gender but was in, like, a cishet, like, relationship? Just, like, a soft butch straight lady who was married to a guy?

JEN MANION [00:47:11] So I think a lot of people and I think, you know, there's a handful of people who were soldiers and sailors who lived as men for a time and then stopped, you know, living fully as men and entered into straight marriages with men. And that's my big question is what did gender mean to them and their husband? Like, I don't buy this idea that, like, "I'm going to live as a man for five years and then and then it suddenly means nothing to me, and I'm just a totally normative, you know, cis woman" as if that never happened, which is how, you know, people have talked about, you know, their experiences.

JVN [00:47:53] Maybe they were bi, like, Maybe they were bi maybe or maybe they were married to, like, a gay man and they were both just, like, "Fuck whoever you want and let's just, like, at least share rent and stuff 'cause it's expensive out in these streets."

JEN MANION [00:48:03] Absolutely. [CROSSTALK] I would love for you if you could, like, fill in some of the details of these stories where we don't have records, I think you have really interesting takes on this.

JVN [00:48:13] I have a flair for it, honey, don't I? Yes.

JEN MANION [00:48:15] Yes, you do!

JVN [00:48:16] So do some listening to this. And they are just, like, obsessed. Can't get enough. Need a career change. What— or just, like, want to do it more as a hobby. Like what resources would you recommend for people that are hoping to learn more after listening to this episode?

JEN MANION [00:48:29] There is a tremendous resource called the Digital Transgender Archive. And a lot of newspaper articles, but then all different kinds of old timey records of trans organizations and individuals are digitized and online free for anyone to access. So that's a phenomenal resource. Um I love Albert Nobbs. This 2011 film that Glenn Close made, it captures, like, a trans masculine experience of this era, they're not actually a female husband, but there is another character in the film who I think could be described as a female husband. So this film, like, brings these kinds of stories to life in a richer way. I think that my book allows there's some amazing, you know, transgender history books: True Sex, Black On Both Sides, Histories of the Transgender Child. Transgender history. It's a really exciting area right now, you know, to read in and to do your own research as well.

JVN [00:49:43] So what's next for you and your research?

JEN MANION [00:49:48] Well, I'm working now more on the history of the LGBTQ community with policing and incarceration and with an emphasis on early resistance to police harassment. Which is, you know, evidenced in a lot of these female husband cases and also of other trans people. So I just think we have a much older history of resistance to policing and harassment that we need to learn more about. And, you know, celebrate and also thinking about how important resistance to policing was in the early LGBT rights movement. You know, from the 1960s to the 1980s, that our community and movement has a lot in common with and shared concerns along with Black Lives Matter and that that, you know, connection should be brought more to the fore about the role of police harassment and violence in even to today, especially as we know trans women of color who are subject to such disproportionate harassment and violence, and also that trans and non-binary masculine people are way overrepresented in jails and prisons today in the US. So just all different ways that queer and trans ness intersects with policing and incarceration.

JVN [00:51:16] Mm hmm. I'm so grateful for you and for your time. I feel like I learned so much. I can't even stand there. Professor Jen Manion, thank you so much for coming on Getting Curious. We're going to put all the links to all of the other work on. There was a description of whatever people are listening to this episode on. So we were just so happy that I got to meet you and that I got to interview you and thank you so much for your time and your research.

JEN MANION [00:51:39] A thank you so much for having me. It's been such a pleasure talking with you, and I'm just such a fan of your work for such a long time, so this is a real treat.

JVN [00:51:50] You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness, our guest this week was Professor Jen Manion. You'll find links to Professor Manion's work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is Freak by Quiñ. Thank you so much to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend and show them how to subscribe. It's so easy and fun. Follow us on Instagram and Twitter if you want to honey, it's @CuriouswithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Middle Seat Digital. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto and Zahra Crim.