# Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Dr. Jacki Antonovich

**JVN** [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and I'm releasing a special episode today in light of the Supreme Court decision to weaken / overturn Roe v. Wade. We on team Getting Curious are devastated by this news. We also know that in difficult moments, it's important to be in community and conversation with each other. And as this happened, we thought to ourselves about an episode that we have coming up in full in a few weeks with Dr. Jacki Antonovich that we recorded a few weeks ago, not quite knowing what would happen with this ruling.

I learned so much and connected so many dots, and if you've read my book "Love That Story" you'll read a lot about my relationship with my dad but I, I got to talk to my dad about this episode and what I was able to tell him moved him in a way that I've never seen him be moved before, and it's really important that we understand that in light of today's decision.

So for that reason, we have made a brief version of this episode, it's a short little preview, on some of the things that were so important to me, as you move into conversations about this turn of events in your life. So with all that being said, here is an excerpt from our upcoming conversation with Dr. Jacki Antonovich, all about the history of reproductive care in the United States.

Welcome to Getting Curious. This is Jonathan Van Ness. This is a really important episode and we're really excited to put it together. We're going to jump right in. Welcome to the show. Professor Jacqueline Antonovich, who is a historian of health and medicine in the U.S. at Muhlenberg College, with particular interest in how race, gender and politics shape the medical field and access to health care. She is also the co-founder of Nursing Clio, an open access, peer reviewed collaborative blog project that ties historical scholarship to present-day issues related to gender and medicine. Welcome to Getting Curious, Jacqueline. How are you?

**JACKI ANTONOVICH** [00:02:00] Oh, well, thank you for having me. I'm doing okay. How are you?

**JVN** [00:02:03] Really good, thank you. Thank you. It's not that you asked, and nor did anyone. But I will just say I did a rearing good, like, like, a way above average eighth grade biography of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis. Just so everyone knows, I didn't do that. I don't know if I still have it anywhere, but it was a really good report on her.

**JACKI ANTONOVICH** [00:02:24] I will say that that's who I am named after, so…

**JVN** [00:02:26] Ah! And when her husband was president in the sixties, abortion rights were not guaranteed. And one thing that I think that I mean, I actually just learned this, one of my

very best friends, her mom was telling me that she used to work at the Quincy Police Station back in the sixties as, like, a secretary. And she told me that monthly women would die from at-home, self-induced abortions. And this was a very common thing to see in police departments at the time. Women slumped over toilets and bathtubs. I'm not being hyperbolic. I'm not being, like, that was the reality of what would happen multiple times a month pre Roe v. Wade. And that's something I just did not understand. And I think so often on Getting Curious or just in my life, I'm commonly shocked by truths of our history that I didn't learn about until way too late. And I think so often it's like under this guide of, like, not wanting to scare children, which is, like, why we don't talk about it. But that's really–, your, your scholarship is incredible, and also Nursing Clio. If you're someone who doesn't read blogs and you're not, like, all up in the blog world, you should really be following this one and reading about it. Can you just start off by kind of telling us a little bit about what your work is in and, and what it really means when, when we say in that intro that "you have particular interest in how race, gender, and politics shape the medical field and access to health care."

**JACKI ANTONOVICH** [00:03:51] Yeah, sure. I mean, that's a, that's a really important question. And one of the reasons why I started Nursing Clio in 2012. It was an election year and there were politicians and pundits on CNN talking about things, like, "legitimate rape." Right. Or talking about things, like, "holding an aspirin in between your legs, you know, so that you don't get pregnant." I have a whole friend group of others who are historians of gender and medicine and race and sexuality. And we would talk about how all of these people were missing the historical context. All of these political discussions that we have have histories and nobody talks about those. And so, you know, I really do feel like the history of gender in medicine, especially how it intersects with race and sexuality and is a discourse, as you mentioned, that's really missing from the news media and all of that. And, and you're right, when we don't do that history, when we don't regularly interrogate that history, we forget about things like how brutal back alley abortions were or self-induced abortions. And it is really hard to talk about. But as we see with, with Roe, you know, probably, you know, being overturned any moment now. It's really important to have these conversations, even if they're difficult.

**JVN** [00:05:15] One thing that really pisses me off, I was just reading it this morning on BuzzFeed was those stories about, like, "What's too much for a bachelorette party?" And in this article they talk about how expensive the price of the plane ticket is, the hotel, the cab, the food. So if you don't have, like, you know, $4000, $3000 of disposable income, which is how much you're going to pay for the flight and the hotels and stuff, you might not be able to get that health care if you're, say, in Tennessee or Louisiana or Oklahoma, that has now passed these incredibly restrictive abortion bans. So, like, we are going to see women again dying of at home back alley abortions. And that is 100%, not to be hyperbolic again, but if you voted for Donald Trump in 2016, that is 100% on you. And now we have to fix that. Now we all have to come together and figure out how to fix what is sure to be a complete fucked up mess. But we can't fix what's going on now if we don't understand where we came from. So or we are recording this amidst the potential rollback of Roe v. Wade, although I think we can, we need

to assume that it is rolled back. We shouldn't waste any time. By the time this episode is out, the Supreme Court's decision will likely be final. So, Jesus Christ, it's chilling. What stands out to you as a historian about this moment?

**JACKI ANTONOVICH** [00:06:36] Well, I think, you know, I think I will answer this question in two ways. I'd actually like to answer this question as a historian who identifies as a woman. Right. I was born in 1973. And as I come up to my 50th birthday, I realize that I've had my entire life, during my entire reproductive life, abortion has been legal for me if I needed it. And to me, the fact that I also have daughters and that they won't grow up with the same human right that I had is especially chilling. Now, as a historian, I would say that one of the things that I think really is—, that I'm struck with is Alito's misunderstanding and misuse of history in his sort of leaked opinion. Right. He, you know, makes these claims that "abortion is not rooted in U.S. history." And then he points to one guy who lived in England in the in the 1700s to make the case that everyone was against abortion and that abortion was wrong. Right. And, of course, this same guy, Matthew Hale, like, burned people at the stake for witchcraft. Not a great guy. That's not how we do history, right, we don't cherry pick our arguments.

**JVN** [00:08:06] So let's not skip over that really quick. So I really just want to, like, really ride this home. So Alito's appointed by George H.W. Bush, the president, from 2000 to 2008, the guy who, like, invades Iraq. So then Alito is now in the Supreme Court. And in this leaked opinion, he literally points out this judge, this British judge or legislator guy, who lived in the 1700s, who literally, according to the law at the time, burned women at the stake for being witches.

**JACKI ANTONOVICH** [00:08:37] Yes.

**JVN** [00:08:38] That is the person that he quotes in this leaked Supreme Court of the United States in 2022. Like, that is something we need to let that come into it. You know, people say a lot of things, but we really have a justice of the United States Supreme Court citing a legislator from the 1700s who burned women at the fucking stake. And when we think about what else was codified into law in the 1700s, there was a lot that was codified into the law in the 1700s that we know is in subhuman not and not of a moral compass that anyone would ascribe to today. So he quotes that guy and then he says, no abortions weren't deeply rooted in U.S. history. And to that we're saying that is not true because they were trying to get abortions in the 1700s?

**JACKI ANTONOVICH** [00:09:33] Yeah, absolutely. So if we, if we want to understand the history of abortion, we actually have to kind of step back and understand the history of women's health in general. And, you know, prior to the 19th century, women largely were the ones who were in control of their reproductive health and their reproductive lives. They are the ones that had sort of the wisdom on things like how to space out your births, how to use birth control and and how to do an abortion if needed. Abortion was a regular part of women's

health care. And so for Alito to allude to one guy in, in England and cherry pick his history. It's just not accurate. We also have to understand the ways in which we conceptualize health, too. Health in up that mid-19th century was viewed as a balance, right, your balance of humors. If you've heard of humoral medicine. And if you were sick, it meant that one of your humors was out of balance. Right. And so you would have to work to get that humor back into balance, which is where you may have heard of things like bloodletting and things like that.

Yeah, and so women, when they didn't get their period, they didn't necessarily think that it was pregnancy. They maybe looked at it as a blockage or an imbalance. So they would do things like taking different kinds of herbs like pennyroyal or tansy or savan. We have all of these domestic medicine books that sort of give instructions on how to and what they would call "bring down the flowers." And and so pregnancy actually wasn't even really considered a thing until about 15 to 24 weeks of pregnancy. And that's when you would have the "moment of quickening." And quickening is basically, like, when you feel the baby kick, right? When you can feel the baby moving around inside of you. That would be considered when the soul entered the fetus. And that would be when you were considered pregnant. And so any sort of abortion that you would induce yourself or have a midwife induce prior to about 24 weeks of pregnancy was not an issue at all, and it was actually practiced quite regularly.

**JVN** [00:11:53] So historically who, like, would, like, seek out an abortion?

**JACKI ANTONOVICH** [00:12:00] I mean, anybody who could get pregnant. It was very, very common.

**JVN** [00:12:05] And how would we see that in, like, the historical text, like, would they be like, "Ye lady Sally would go to the midwife to take the pennywort until the flowers, raineth," or something?

**JACKI ANTONOVICH** [00:12:20] Exactly that! No, so we actually have a lot of evidence of this. And we have, as I mentioned, we have a lot of these domestic medicine handbooks that were produced. And they would have recipes that would be for, you know, like, as I said, like, "bringing down the flowers" or to "start your menses" as that they would call it. We also—, I think one of the things that was making the news lately was that even Benjamin Franklin had an abortive recipe in one of his books. So we have a lot of those. And we also have one of the most famous documentations that we have is a, is a diary of a midwife named Martha Ballard, who kept a diary every day as her practices. And then, you know, if things went wrong you would maybe find these things in court cases or in newspapers, especially later on when abortion starts to become criminalized.

**JVN** [00:13:14] So historically, it was always a kind of midwifes who would perform them?

**JACKI ANTONOVICH** [00:13:19] Yes. I mean, prior to about the mid-19th century and then later, you know, physicians began to perform them more.

**JVN** [00:13:28] So prior to late the 1850s when you, like, first, you know, diddle, up until we knew he feel the baby kick, that's not controversial the midwife gives you a little potion of, like, some hogwart, penny weed, polyjuice potion. And then do they work, did, like, abortion tonics work?

**JACKI ANTONOVICH** [00:13:48] I mean, we, I think there's contradicting evidence about whether these items worked as abortifacients or not. But I will, I do want to say that, you know, some of these substances are really dangerous if taken in the–, you know, so for anybody listening to this, right, if taken in the wrong quantities, can be really dangerous. So I don't want to sort of romanticize it and say that, you know, "women had abortions all the time and they were fine and they didn't, you know, get sick or die." Because that did happen, but it was not seen as controversial. I would say that we get, like, the first law against abortion in Connecticut around the 1820s, and that is mainly enacted to protect women from abortion through poison. Right. So if they were, they took too much of something. But it wasn't to protect the fetus. It was to protect the mother. A lot of these abortion laws that we first get in the 19th century have absolutely nothing to do with the fetus. They have to do with protecting the women from, like, inscrupulous abortion doctors are getting hurt.

**JVN** [00:15:00] Is that what it was really like at risk to the people seeking abortions and the providers at the time was, like,  causing someone to become severely ill or die?

**JACKI ANTONOVICH** [00:15:07] Yes, absolutely. We have this really wonderful source about a woman who got pregnant out of wedlock and then her, her boyfriend at the time and this is during the Puritan era, wanted her to get an abortion. Her name was Sarah Grosner, and they first tried to do herbs and that didn't work. And then they found a doctor to do it. And then she later died because, you know, medical care at the time for anyone was pretty dangerous. And the, the doctor was put on trial not because of killing a fetus, but because the woman died. And so that was generally what people objected to.

**JVN** [00:15:50] Got it. Wow. Yes. So the right to abortion is, like, one thing. But then there's also, like, forced contraception, which has another long history in the US. I don't know, my, my automatic shade keeps, like, lifting and lowering, like, so if you hear, like, a weird, like, "grr grr," I don't know what that is. I thought I was sitting on the remote, but I'm not, I'm like, oh, it's, like, literally over there and it's really, it's like a ghost or something. There's like a pro-life ghost who like, not into this.

You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness.

Stay tuned for our full episode with Dr. Jacki Antonovich about the history of reproductive care in the United States.

You'll find links to her work and additional resources in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on.

Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend, please, and show them how to subscribe.

You can follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN, where we'll be covering the latest on the SCOTUS ruling. 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.