

Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Dr. Janina Ramirez

JVN // 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. You know I love a history episode. They are some of my absolute favorites, and especially an episode that challenges everything I know about a particular time and place. Which in this case, it's really going to challenge everything because I know absolutely nothing about this time and place. So this week we're headed to the Middle Ages to talk all about Vikings, Game of Thrones-style kingdoms, and, of course, any and all gay stuff our guest has come across in her research. So welcome to the show, Dr. Janina Ramirez, who is an Oxford lecturer, BBC broadcaster, researcher, and writer. She is the author of *Femina: A New History of the Middle Ages Through the Women Written Out*, published by HarperCollins. Today we are asking: what was going on in the Middle Ages? Janina, good morning. How are you? What's happening in your life?

JANINA RAMIREZ // Oh, I am very good. Jonathan. I'm coming to you from Oxford in England to talk to you about my favorite thing, the Middle Ages, and hopefully blow your mind with some new discoveries.

JVN // A lot of what I know about history has happened through, like, documentaries or through this podcast, but mostly through this podcast, I've gotten to interview lots of historians about lots of different times. One thing that I'm immediately intrigued by with your work and the title of your book is that it's *A New History of the Middle Ages Through the Women Written Out*. And so one thing we learned about early China history with one of our favorite guests, Dr. Jue Guo, history is written by the "winners," like, the air quote, "winners," right. It's, like, those are the people whose, like, history is treasured and, like, carried forward and so if someone—and we see this in Egyptian history as well, like, a lot of, like, people who come into power after a certain person would, like, try to, like, wipe them from the history books. So let's talk about the Middle Ages. When and where are the Middle Ages?

JANINA RAMIREZ // Right, this is a great place to start. And this actually ties into what you were saying there about history being written by the victors. I'd say even more mundane and boringly, history is written by the winners. It's usually the admin, the people who've got access to these materials, who have an intention, who have some sort of patron or somebody that they're writing for. And so, you know, it's about survival, and it's not even about what survives from the time. It's about what survives down to us. Because, you know, even now, there's book burnings going on. And you think about this idea of how a text managed to make it across the centuries. There's reasons for that, usually reasons that they are propping up *later* ideologies, *later* kind of states of nations, and that's why they survive. So the whole notion of what we're looking at today is going to be a bit, you know, it's about how we find the evidence. But in terms of the Middle Ages, it's a good place to start because just that title, the "Middle" Ages, it's, it already starts demeaning this period because it's, like, "There's this wonderful period of classical inspiration and the Greeks and the Romans and aren't they fantastic? And then there's the Renaissance. And in between there's a middle bit, the Middle Ages." And, and it's also, you know, the early part that is referred to as the Dark Ages. Another term I just can't stand!

JVN // Okay, so that's when I thought it was called, Janina! And even when I was, like, brainstorming for this episode, because I was, like, I was, like, "What was going on in the dark ages? Like, do we really just not know anything about them?" And then through some

of our anticipatory research, we were finding that a lot of historians are like, "We don't really even say that word no more."

JANINA RAMIREZ // Yeah.

JVN // "We don't even really, like, say, the Dark Ages." And we were, like, "Oh, I'm sorry, I haven't learned about it since, like, the fourth grade." So tell us more about that!

JANINA RAMIREZ // It's good, I can do it! I spent most of my life using the term in order to debunk it. So it's, like, it's not—yeah, it's this sort of Monty Python creation of peasants in a field, everyone living nasty, brutish, short lives. And there's a reason for why it was thought of as the Dark Ages. This is not, there is a, a genuine kind of history to the term. When the Roman Empire sort of collapsed in the 400s, there was a vacuum, a power vacuum left. And into that power vacuum, basically a dictatorial empire had collapsed. And so what they referred to as the "barbarians," these people who'd rage around and seize all of the Romans' land. Those were actually people in their own countries taking back the land that the Romans had taken from them. So, you've got a change in government. You've got a change in admin. The Romans, the reason that they're seen as so great is because they write everything down. When you stop writing everything down, there appears to be a gap in the historical textual records. And how do we fill that gap? Well, up until, like, 100 years ago, you really couldn't. And that's why everyone thought it was "a dark age." They literally thought, "Everybody stopped writing, everyone put their quills down and life just became short and rubbish." But actually, when you start to develop things like archeology, DNA analysis, you know, when science is out front in history, when you can use all new technology, nobody disappears. And you start to see these cultures coming back out of the ground. So, in England, for example, we don't have pyramids and beautiful stone temples like the Greeks and the Egyptians, but we used to build massive halls in wood. But the problem is wooden halls, don't—they, they disappear on the landscape. They burn down...

JVN // Wooden holes? Or what? Wooden what?

JANINA RAMIREZ // Halls! You know, feasting halls. Banqueting halls.

JVN // Oh, yes, yes, yes. I was, like, I was, like, "Why, girl?" [CROSSTALK] Are you just trying to be, like, a wood pit? Like, come on, wood, wood pit!

JANINA RAMIREZ // And, and the problem is, that doesn't leave much evidence for the archeologists, but then they start to develop processual understanding. So you could find, like, hole echoes. These literally are *holes* in the ground now that are the remains of massive timbers that were sort of supporting these huge structures. So, like, in the last sort of 50, 60 years, everyone was going, "Hang on a minute. Maybe it wasn't such a 'dark age.'" And then you look at the manuscripts, and then you look at the jewelry, and then you read the poetry and you start to see this beautiful, multi-colored, gorgeous, exciting world. And that's the stuff I love to study.

JVN // Okay, that's fucking fascinating. So the reason that, like, the "Dark Age" is kind of misleading—to recap here, tell me if I'm hearing you right. So basically, the Romans are, like, writing everything down. Then the Roman Empire collapses and then, like, as different places and different cultures are kind of taking back their land and, like, figuring out how to, like, re-institutionalize and like, do their self-governance and stuff. They stop, like, writing stuff down so much. So then in modern times, like, we were, like, "Oh, that's the Dark Ages, because we just don't know what happened then." But really there—as science becomes

better and as historians are able to, like, key into this time more, we're able to see that there actually was like multiple flourishing cultures and it wasn't really this Dark Age at all. Right?

JANINA RAMIREZ // Oh, you're so right. This is, you are—absolutely, gold star, A star. It's exactly that. And I think this is another step to this, which is a sort of modern preconception about literacy, right? So today, if you call someone “illiterate,” it's almost a slur. It's, like, “You're ignorant, you're stupid, you're illiterate.” But *literacy*, the actual reading and writing of texts was done by such a spattering of people. The majority of stories and poems, they were transmitted orally. People spoke them, they performed them. You know, there's this vibrant world of performing arts, where they're reciting the poem Beowulf. And, and it's, it's all about the alliteration. And it's more like a rap battle, Beowulf. It's sort of heroes doing cool things. And, and they were supposed to be performed in these giant banqueting halls like a sort of piece of theater. But that doesn't leave its record, does it? That doesn't, that's so hard to re, reconstruct. And the problem with writing things down is we get lazy. Once we go back to writing things, we forget them. There's been studies done on memory retention between the medieval period and now. And their memory retention is anything up to five times greater, because they had to remember everything who was married to who, what were the boundaries of the land, you know, all the stories, all the history. And they weren't writing it down, so it had to be held in their minds. And yet now, we're lazy. We write it down, “Eh! Can forget about it, it's on a piece of paper.” The writings we do have that give us a glimmer of their world. God, what an amazing world. So they believed in riddles and and everything was a challenge, something for the mind to sort of play with and unpack and unpick. It's just, it's so inspiring once you dig deep into it.

JVN // Okay, we have to, like, rewind a little bit. Okay, so you had said at the beginning when we were just even defining, like, you know, when were the Middle Ages, I just started writing down, like, a, like, a chronological line of, like, eras, like, it's giving, like, Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour, but, like, humanity from like a Western perspective, which, you know, we know has its own problems. So, like, it's giving, like, antiquity or something, which is, like, Roman in Greek or something? Is that what antiquity is?

JANINA RAMIREZ // Yeah. Yeah. So I can give you a rough timeline, definitely. So if we think about the beginning section is, you know, maybe 200 B.C., up to about 400 A.D. Then we've got Middle Ages, could be split into early, high, and late, which is, like, 400 to about 1500. And then 1500 onwards is, like, Renaissance, early modern, industrial revolution, modern.

JVN // So goddamn, the Middle Ages technically consist of 400 CE to 1500 CE?

JANINA RAMIREZ // Exactly, it's a massive chunk of time and people don't look at it!

JVN // That's long!

JANINA RAMIREZ // And it's history's underdog! You know, people think, like you said in your introduction, they think it's sort of Game of Thrones and they think it's, you know, women in pointy hats. But actually it's, it's double the distance between us and Shakespeare now—and some. So it's a huge stretch of time. And to reduce it all into, like, this, this one term of the Middle Ages, it frustrates me. We're talking about over a millennium.

JVN // It's, like, literally that's over. It's 1100 years. That's so—and you're so you're saying it's, like, beginning Middle Ages and then, like, the mid Middle Ages and then, like, the late Middle Ages?

JANINA RAMIREZ // That's it, yeah. Yeah, so we sort of split it. We tend to talk about early Middle Ages being, like, the collapse of Rome around 400, 420. Then there is a confusing bit when you, till you get to about 600 and then things start to make a bit more sense and we call that early medieval, later to early medieval. And that goes up to the Norman conquest 1066-ish. Then we go sort of 1066-ish up to around 1250 through 1300. And that's your sort of your high middle ages, you've got some Romanesque in there, you've got the Normans. Then you've got your late medieval, which is going up to—and into—the Renaissance because there's no lines in the sand. It's not, it's not like everyone wakes up on the morning of 1250 and says, "Right, left behind the old high Middle Ages. Here come the late Middle Ages. Let's go." It's—they're not living that way, but we kind of have to, we do see major shifts culturally that we can sort of identify as being early, high, or late. Yeah.

JVN // And then you'd mentioned that the, like, the Renaissance, like, where—is the Middle Ages, like, would that just be, like, Europe and Scandinavia and, like, England that we're talking about? Or does it extend to, like, the Middle East, too? Or what?

JANINA RAMIREZ // It, it, it does. I mean we, we sort of have parallel cultures going on. So all the way through my book, I'm always talking about how Europe is intersecting with Africa, it's intersecting with the Arab world, looking over, you've got the Silk Road running right the way through the heart, which connects it all. And but what's going on in those regions are playing out on different sorts of time scales. And even across Europe, you know, my book will from, like, say, Scandinavia all the way down over to Poland, you know, thinking about Italy and France and Germany, and, and different things are happening in different places at different times. But you could definitely see it as that's the sort of chronology for *European* development.

JVN // Got it.

JANINA RAMIREZ // And the others have their own different chronologies, but there are patterns as well. You know, millennial tension always leads to change. So whenever there's a turn of a new millennium, it seems to be a big moment.

JVN // That reminds me a little bit of our episode about the great apes when Dr. Laura Simone Lewis. Dr. Laura Simone Lewis. She was saying that, like, instead of thinking, like, evolution as, like, this really linear line, it actually is, like, more like a delta where, like, people are kind of crissing out, crossing, crossing back in. It's, like, there isn't, it's not so clear cut.

JANINA RAMIREZ // Absolutely.

JVN // And that's kind of—which is really interesting. And I hate to sound like one of those goddam straight guys on TikTok, but I will say that when you said the collapse of the Roman Empire, I immediately had a lot of questions. So is the reason between, like, 400 and 600 that it's a little bit confusing because, like, didn't really have newspapers, didn't really have, like, obviously no Internet. So, like, that's why, like, you wouldn't have woken up and be, like, "Oh, they're collapsed." Like, it would have taken a while for that news to get all the way from, like, Rome all the way up to the United Kingdom, that it's, like, "We don't got to listen to those hoes no more." I'm guessing? Is that why it was kind of confusing? Because,

like, some institutions would continue to carry on, but then it's, like, "Oh, wait, we don't have the backing of, like, you know, Rome or, like, DC or whatever anymore. So joke's on us. Like, we're going to get eaten by these barbarians." But really they were, like, the local people who are like, doing their thing, you know? Is that like an easy way to say it?

JANINA RAMIREZ // You're so the best student! Once they're gone, they take them, they take their administrators or their civil servants, and they whip them all back to Rome. And then there's a power vacuum. Everyone's, like, "Oh shit, who makes the ideas, then?" You know, "Who's going to tell us how many taxes we need to pay and, like, who's going to get that road rebuilt?" So there's a bit of a mess. But into that vacuum, you know, you see other groups sort of sliding in and going, "Hang on a minute, this is an opportunity." There's this big moment called the Advent of Saxonis, which is when there's a mass migration that seems to take place from these regions of, like, Denmark, Germany, these Germanic areas of the Anglo-Saxons and Jews. They, it seems at first they may have been invited over as, like, a strong arm, sort of like mercenary soldiers. It's, like, "Oh my God, we've lost our army. Can you come and help us, please?" So they might have come over like that at first, but then there's this, this flood, it seems, that that has a profound effect on, on England. To the point of where that's when the English language starts. English now has virtually no words that can be traced back to the Celtic Romano-British, or most of our language starts with this Germanic migration. So all English people are German immigrants!

JVN // Wait, wait, wait, wait. Wait a fuckin' minute, Janina! Wait a goddamn minute! So everyone leaves, and then it's—because I thought you meant *Rome*. So England says, "Wait, all of our homes have left. Everyone's gone. Like, these Romans fucking people are gone. Like, fuck me are people like, shit." And so then they invite over the German people. Like, "Why don't you come over? Like, it's kind of cool over here. Like, the Romans are gone. We don't have all these rules and shit. Like, we're kind of doing our own thing." And so then, and so then people just start, like, flooding into England in the 400s and 500s?

JANINA RAMIREZ // It's absolutely crazy, it's a part of our history we don't even really know ourselves. I mean, when you see our blooming home sector at the moment talking about, "Stop the boats and no more immigration!" You're, like, "Idiot, we're all immigrants, you idiot!" So for me, it's very frustrating because, yeah, what happens is if we were to talk about sort of "native" British people, they would be the Celtic people that the Romans at first oppressed. And those Celtic people, you know, they carry out in Ireland, they carry on in Cornwall, bits of Brittany, where there's these Celtic dialects. But what seems to happen around this time, like you say, around 500 A.D., is that the people in England are not speaking in Celtic anymore. They start speaking this German tongue, old English. And the Celtic bits, they're sort of pushed to the edges. So Wales, Cornwall, Scotland, Ireland, that's where those—and they're all Christian as well. So the Christian Celtic Romano-British, they push over to the edges and what we now call England today it starts to have the pagan Germanic pantheon of gods. That's where you get your Thor and your Woden and your Freya. The whole landscape changes. It's run by a new military elite, these sort of Germanic warrior heroes. So it's a wholesale transformation. And then we don't really talk about that. We don't sort of understand. That's the birth of the British Isles. That's why the British Isles still looks the way it does today. And then and it's all around this time that we call the Dark Age, yeah. And it's the time of King Arthur, because that's when the legendary King Arthur would have lived.

JVN // Wait! Camelot? Like, fucking—wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Like, Sean Connery and, like, the first night, like, that whole thing?

JANINA RAMIREZ // Totally.

JVN // That was so hot. Like, when he cups the water, like, when she cups that water from that leaf. Ooooh, like, my timbers are so—remember that scene with that leaf when they're, like, drinking that water from that leaf and that's his first knight?

JANINA RAMIREZ // And I do not remember the leaf, but I'm so glad you enjoyed the leaf.

JVN // Because really, it was hot. So Middle Ages, it's, like, 500, like, 600. Tumultuous, tumultuous. Change. Change. Change. Migration. Migration. Migration. 600. What's the tea in the early Middle Ages?

JANINA RAMIREZ // 600 is a really good date to pick it up. In fact, I would say 597, even more specific, three years before because that is the date that Pope Gregory the Great sends this, this poor guy Augustus, he does not want to go, he's leaving Rome with its beautiful food and its gorgeous climate, and he's being sent all the way across to the edge of the world where it rains. And, and the only source he knows about is this historian called Tacitus who says that the British paint themselves blue and run into battle naked. I mean, he's not looking forward to this trip at all, but he goes, bless him, and it takes a long time, gets there eventually. And he is, this is what's known as "the coming of Christianity." Again, it's as if everybody woke up in the morning and went, "Oh, it's not Woden anymore, it's Jesus. Silly me!" But they do slowly convert then. And that's, I find that really interesting because it's not an invasion—like, the Norman Conquest is really interesting because it's an invasion. It's an actual kind of conquest of a, in the secular world. But this is sort of an ideological invasion. It's like a change, a massive, massive change that comes about when these people become Christian.

JVN // So Pope in 597 sends this Augustus guy and that kind of starts, like, "Oh, you guys are actually gonna burn in hell because this is, like, pagan. Do you really want to burn in hell? It's, like, kind of, like, brutish and, like, not the tea. You should really become Christians." And so then that starts the, like, Christ—that starts, like, the slow transformation of like mainland Britain or like the United Kingdom at the time into Christian instead of, like, Thor, Pagan, all that other stuff.

JANINA RAMIREZ // Yeah. And then, and then—yeah, so that's totally correct. And yeah, and it's some, I think it's slightly motivated for other reasons that are purely spiritual ones. They dress it all up in this amazing story—you'll like this—about how Gregory the Great found out about the Britons and why he wanted to send a mission there. And it all revolves around gorgeous young boys. So he's gone, the pope's gone to the forum in Rome, and he sees these slaves being sold and they're particularly beautiful—pale, pale skin, blond hair, blue eyes. And he goes up to the slave master. He says, "Are these, these, these beautiful boys, where are they from?" And he says, "They're from a place called Britain. And their leader is called King Aelle." It was called A-E-L-L-E. That's the leader, their King is called King Aelle. And he went, "Oh, that is, that is important because now I will send Christianity to them and everyone will sing Aelleluia." So he cut it as a pun on the name of the king. So Pope Gregory could, could tell a pun!

JVN // Oh, okay. Yes. So, okay, my brain's breaking—

JANINA RAMIREZ // Sorry I'm breaking your brain!

JVN // Well, no—so then was he, like, “Oh, if we make them all Christian, then we won't enslave them any more?” Or something?

JANINA RAMIREZ // No, I think it was because Rome was really poor at this point. Like, we think about Rome as this eternally rich, beautiful city. It's—everything's gone tits up during Gregory's rule because the Tiber has flooded, all the food has disappeared. People are living in abject poverty, so he's looking for kind of a quick buck. How can he get taxes? How can he kind of empower the papacy on the global stage? “Oh, I know there used to be this kingdom that the Romans had somewhere up there, some of—Britain, I think it was called? Let's, let's get that back. Then we could get their taxes.” So there's an ulterior motive, unfortunately. I mean, we could say, yes, it was all about their spiritual well-being. But I think that, you know, there's *usually* an ulterior motive in history.

JVN // Okay. So that's what happened. So aside from the, like, raging, I'm guessing, like, pedophilia and slavery, not great for humanity on, you know, several, those poor fucking Jesus Christ fucking kids. And why can't Jesus settle the fuck down? 'Mkay? Those goddamn followers have been—the arms cherries of Christianity have been literally wreaking havoc for millennia. Okay, Christ! Okay, so anyway, that's fine. So—

JANINA RAMIREZ // Well, what I was going to say was, I know this all sounds complicated. If you pin it down to dates, it gets a little bit easier. So 400, right, go away. 600, sort of, Rome comes back, but it's a Christian Rome, and then it gets a little bit more complicated again, because when we get up to the 700s, going into the 800s, the Vikings arrive. And basically these guys are sort of, like, the original Anglo-Saxons and dukes. They believe in Thor and Woden and Freya. They speak Old Norse. They've got a warrior culture, and they then end up taking over most of the north of England. To this day, you know, the DNA profile of people in the north of England shows a really strong Scandinavian element that came through from Viking settlers. So it's never clear cut. And, you know, it becomes this sort of cauldron where you've got kind of Christian Anglo-Saxons in the south and then you've got pagan Vikings in the north. But that's what I love. I love this sort of, the clashing of those, those cultures and how it expresses itself in arts and in literature and in the myths that you've got all these awesome women as well doing cool, kickass stuff in there.

JVN // So, so that's going on and well, there was that King Aelle or whatever. And then there's like, but it's really giving power vacuum. But then your research focuses on a group of women from the Middle Ages. I can't decide if I want us to go through chronologically, and then you tell me about the people through—because so what, because what happens once the Norse come in? So they're all up in the—just don't forget about the ladies that you wrote about. It's, like, when they come into the picture. So let's keep going chronologically, because it is kind of fun.

JANINA RAMIREZ // It's great. It's great. Yeah, everything we're talking about marries up with my book. I was really careful because—that's the other thing, you've summed it up. We reduce this, this one 1100 years down into, like, a term, “the Middle Ages.” But I really wanted to pull it apart, pull the strings apart. So each chapter in my book is a sort of a different century, and I move around all over the place. So each chapter I move to a different country or a different location, and I pick a different theme. So in one it might be women as warriors, it might be women as politicians, it might be women as polymaths. So I sort of, I do, I do three things in each chapter. I change the time, I change the place, I change the theme. So, so far, in terms of the ones I've told you about, I do the 600s, that early conversion, through this lost woman, the Loftus Princess. The only reason we know she exists is because of archeologists—she was dug up. And her necklace tells us so much

about the time in which she lived because it's—the outside part of it is like an Anglo-Saxon warrior bit of bling, gold and garnet, coulsonite—beautiful, exquisitely worked stuff that's coming from the old world, you know, the world of the pagan Anglo-Saxons. But the middle has this great big cabochon garnet shell in the shape of—it's in the shape of a shell. And the shell is a Christian symbol. It's associated with resurrection, with the saints. So she's sort of mashing up her past and her present and her future in one object that she's then buried with. And she's buried in a bed—which I am, I'm so signing up for a bed burial, that's got to be the way to go. But she's, like, honored by her community. So it shows this moment captured in time in the Earth of this community that's going through huge ideological change. You know, “How do we bury our dead? Do we bury them with grave goods? Because that's what we've been doing for, like, 400 years. Or do we not? Or do we bury them east-west because that's what the Christians do?” That one woman becomes a lens onto that whole period of change.

JVN // Did they do her east-west? Did she have, like, a little bit of this and a little bit of that?

JANINA RAMIREZ // She had a little bit of this and a little bit of that. So she's buried east-west. She started with grave goods, but she got Christian symbol on her. It's mad, like, the, the graveyard—it's, it's called a final phase graveyard because it's the last of these kind of big, pagan, you know, exciting burials where there's treasure and gold in the ground. So there's bits of gold, bits of jewelry. But it's so fascinating, like, there's one woman that's buried near to her who's been buried with Celtic coins that are already, like, let's say, about 500, 600 years old. So she's already collected these antiquities. *She* must have found them in the ground. And then she's, like, “These are nice and they're old and they remind me of something. So I'm going to be—wear them, and I'm going to be buried with them.” So it's, like, we think we're the ones who have the luxury of looking back across history. But they were interested in it too. They were, like, “Oh, this is our, this is our heritage. This is the people who went before us.” So yeah, I think that's another caution I always give when we look backwards from here into the past. We have the benefit of hindsight. We know what comes after. So we can say, “Oh, there's this progression, we see this happening and then this happening and oh, that must have been anticipated.” The people living through it have no idea what's coming. All they have for reference is what's gone before. And so when they're doing things, they're doing them by accident. They're doing them because if—you know, they're doing U-turns, they're contradicting themselves, and making mistakes. That's what clumsily bumbling through life, as we all do. And then later generations go, “Ah! There must have been a method in all of this. They must have known what was coming.” They didn't. It was far more accidental than that.

JVN // That's—okay, that's fascinating. So from the 700s to the 900s, there's kind of a lot of, like, Game of Thrones style infighting between, like, the northern, more north, like, Scandinavian people and then, like, the southern people? Like, there's fighting going on through all that?

JANINA RAMIREZ // Yeah, yeah. It's a tricky time. There's a lot of bloodshed.

JVN // And, like, cultures are kind of finding themselves and, like, developing into, like, what they would like later become?

JANINA RAMIREZ // Absolutely. And try to define themselves almost in opposition to each other. So, like, while the Vikings are sort of, “Yeah, we're all here for the, for the pagan religion and we've got, you know, our culture and our way of doing things.” Down in

Wessex, you've got Alfred the Great who's sort of pushing it back, going, "Hang on a minute. Well, if *they're* pagan, we're going to be *more* Christian, we're going to build *bigger* churches. We're going to be the opposite of you guys over there. We're going to like, pump funds into the church and make it really, like, 'We are Christian than you are not.'" So it's all about that kind of, yeah, setting each other off against each other. But in the midst of that, you've also got these blending cultures. You've got people who've got, you know, a parent who's, who's Norse and one that's Southern English or one that's Frankish or whatever. And there's intermarriage, there's cultural collision, there's this constant sort of tension and then also blending and harmony between these people, too. So I love, I think, you know, when you start to look at the art in particular, that's where you can really tease out these, these real finely worked cultural threads coming from lots and lots of different parts of world. And, you know, people tend to think about the medieval period as a time that's really parochial. Everyone lives and dies within sight of their local parish church. But these people, they were travelers and traders. And on the move, the Vikings were able to get over to Newfoundland, you know, and they traveled down to Constantinople. They're moving vast, vast areas, and people don't stay in one place. They keep moving. And that's what leads to exciting kind of, I suppose, historical detective work is working out where they've been and where they're going.

JVN // I have a random question that I wasn't totally prepared for, but I think you'll be able to field it. So is that where, like, witch trials eventually kind of come out of because you have all these, like, old pagan religions that are still practiced in pockets, but then as, like, Christians, like, kind of tighten their grip and, like, use this as a way to, like, you know, relegate or to, like, get taxes, to assert control. And they do that through, like, manipulating people's spiritual ideas, largely through fear, which we still have now. But is that where witch trials came from? Like, when was—did you research or, like, did any findings like the first witch trial?

JANINA RAMIREZ // This is such a great question! I wanted to do something on magic and witchcraft for this book, but there is no record of it. It doesn't really exist as a concept until you go into the 1600s.

JVN // Ahhh!

JANINA RAMIREZ // It's not a medieval thing! So the whole premise behind my book is that we have got it all so wrong. We've got our understanding so wrong with our timings. We've been, we've inherited this version of history that's come down to us and it works for the people of the last few centuries to tell us that the medieval period is ignorant, dark, brutish. "Because *we*, we're modern, we're enlightened, we're post-reformation. Everything that came before, it was dark and superstitious and ignorant. But thank goodness there was a break with it. Thank God we destroyed all that pope, that papacy, and all that nonsense." And that's not what it was like at all. This is the propaganda version of what the medieval period was like. And the role of women in particular, that's what my whole book is about. Women could find real power and agency, which was completely denied to them after the 1500s, after the Reformation. It's not so much that, you know, women had tons and tons of amazing rights and then they were taken away from them, that they had more opportunities and those opportunities were then shut down. And that's where you get your witch trials, because what you have is a latent memory in communities that they were wise women, there were women that were running, you know, the religious institutions that were doing medicine, that were healing, that had, like, loads of wisdom and advice that you could go to, those women had been the anchoresses, the nuns, you know, the—like, they were connected *maybe* even back to sort of folklore and Celtic practices, you know, right back

into the deep, deep history. And they don't have a place anymore. And that, that's what they're getting rid of with the witch trials. They're killing those women. They're killing those remains of those women.

JVN // It reminds me of, like, how conservatives must have felt about trans things in public in the last few years. It's, like, it had been going, it had been going, it had been going. And then they're, like, "We aren't going to fucking take this no more. We're going to, we're going to do 'tradition.' We're going to do the way that it 'should' be or was or whatever." There's this—like, that's really interesting to me.

JANINA RAMIREZ // Yeah. Then it comes to, like, the 900 coming up to the year 1000, and this is that, that period I wanted to really capture this idea of Viking expansion. Firstly, debunking loads of misconceptions about the Vikings. They never wore horned helmets! I don't know how many times I need to say that they did not—the whole helmet was an invention of a German costume designer in the 1900s because he put horns on the helmet so the people at the back of the theater could see which ones were the Vikings. They didn't wear them. But also it's a catch-all term. The areas we're talking about are now Iceland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, that's the sort of Scandinavian area. But they're not one people. They're, you know, they've got different rules, they've got different things going on. They're fighting amongst themselves. But there's this idea that certainly they've developed seafaring in a way that's never been anything like it before. Their, their crafts are so amazing, they can go over sea waves and up rivers. So they're, like, super designed. And this allows them to travel the world. And wherever they go, they do a little bit of pillaging. We know that. But they were also settling and they were also intermarrying and they were trading. So I wanted to show the complexity of their world.

And there's this incredible discovery that was made a few years ago. The original burial was found way back at the turn of the century. In the 1900s, this archeologist called [Hjalmar] Stolpe had gone to this island called Birka, which is sort of right in the Baltic Sea region. It would have been a stopping off post for all these traders going along the kind of motorways of the sea. And it becomes really, really powerful. And, and, you know, he excavated this, this island and he found hundreds and hundreds of graves. But the biggest and the best one was up on a mound on the seafront, next to the army barracks because there was a huge, big army barracks to defend the city—to defend the town. And it had a big boulder raised up on it. So think, like, war memorial, you know, everyone's going to look at it and be, like, "Somebody important is under that—that, that boulder." When he excavated that, he found what he described as "the finest Viking warrior burial ever discovered." So it's an individual, sat on a throne or possibly on a horse's saddle, with a stallion and a mare, two horses sacrificed and buried at their feet. And then all around them is a full armory of weapons. I mean, like, the absolute top notch armor. You've got shields, swords, arrows, bows, you know, daggers, everything—the works.

JVN // Was poor horses. Why did they have to die?

JANINA RAMIREZ // I know, I know. To ride them into Valhalla at the end of days.

JVN // Aw, these fucking people!

JANINA RAMIREZ // They're going riding into Valhalla. But yeah, so, so there's this burial. And for, like, nearly 100 years, everybody was saying, like, "This, this guy in this burial must just be the, the shit because he's got all this armor." And then it—

JVN // It was a girl.

JANINA RAMIREZ // They ran the DNA—

JVN // Ahhhhh!

JANINA RAMIREZ // And it was, like, it was two Xs everywhere. Oh, my God, this is 2018. And the internet went insane, and I can't even tell you this, Jonathan. It broke my heart because I don't, by this point, I'd written, like, a set of novels for children where the lead character is a female Viking, and I've got colleagues saying to me, "Oh, women don't fight in the Viking world. There's no evidence for it." And I'm, like, "It's in the sagas, it's in the poetry, it's certainly bloody happening." And then they found this date and then the internet said, "Oh, hang on a minute, Women can do a lot of things, but they can't fight. I don't believe it." You don't believe this scientific analysis?! So anyway, since then, because the point was—like, up until that point, archeologists, if they found a sword in the ground, they'd say it's a man. If they found jewelry in a grave, they'd say it's a woman, because we didn't have DNA analysis. Since then, they're re-running all these graves. They're finding guys with jewelry. They're finding loads of women with weapons and with battle cuts and all the rest of it. And it was this assumption that it had to be that way. And it's not! We've got to, you know, we cannot impose our modern assumptions backwards. Instead, the Viking culture ends up being this fascinatingly inclusive and diverse place where, particularly during their festivals, they subvert norms. So the men dress deliberately as women. Woden, the chief of the gods, he's shown on a throne with, like, loads of jewelry on, and a dress. And then the Valkyries, they're, like, these warriors riding in with weapons. So they deliberately mess around with gender. They are doing it on purpose and enjoying it. And I think that, you know, we need to be talking about that, that we think that gender was a new God. You know, people have been having these discussions forever.

JVN // I am obsessed. I can't handle. Okay, so then we get—okay, so that's the thousands, expeditiously. Let's talk about Hildegard of Bingen. So she's a 12th century celebrity, so does she happen in, like, the 1100s?

JANINA RAMIREZ // Yeah, you're doing great. We are really, really carrying through the centuries here. So I will take you to Hildegard. Now, we are in Germany. We are in the Rhineland, Palatine. This, this stunning forested area of Germany, and this is the heart of the Holy Roman Empire. Right? The Holy Roman Emperor, big dude in Christianity. He is based here at his palace in Ingelheim. And just down the road from there, there's this little monastery that's called Disibodenberg, and I went there. I managed to find it. There's no directions. There's not even a road to the place. I use my satnav. I climbed up this hill and on top of this hill is a *perfect* medieval monastery. It's, like, it's ruins, there's no roofs, but you can walk through the rooms. You could go in the actual room that Hildegard stayed in and walk down the nave of the church that she practiced in, go in the refectory where she ate. It's beautiful and eerie and gorgeous. And, and I went there to try and find this woman. So Hildegard is still a total heroine in Germany. If you've got German listeners to this podcast, they're gonna be, like, "Oh, yeah, Hildegard, we know her," but she's not known—as well known—as she should be around the rest of the world.

And she lived—she was born in 1098. So right on that kind of end of that, that century, and she lives for 81 years. That's a long time to live by any standard, particularly at this point. But it's good, because what I say to people is, "Hildegard of Bingen is Leonardo da Vinci, centuries before Leonardo da Vinci and *better* than Leonardo DaVinci, because she finished all her projects and he didn't." He notoriously left his masterpieces unfinished. She's a

visionary, which actually what she was suffering from, it seems, was migraines. But she was using a sort of pulsing—the idea of the vision coming out in this circular manifestation, pulsing around the edges, that seems to feed into her pictures, her artworks. Her artworks are really psychedelic. They're, like, really, really different and weird, all jagged edges, it's a sharp contrast, metallic essence, which is what people describe when they have migraines as well. So she clearly was having migraines, but she uses that to sort of fire up her spiritual visionary status.

And she writes these bestsellers, her first one's—Scivias—it's read by the pope. Pope thinks it's amazing, tells everyone about it. And then she goes on a book tour and she is advising the emperor, the kings, the queens, She's advising the pope. She's actually, like, having a go at them on political matters. There's a terrible wave of anti-Semitism that wipes across Europe at this point—we're going into the time of the Crusades—and it's causing all sorts of the kind of hostilities between “them” and “us.” And, and Hildegard can't stand it. She's telling the Empress, she's telling the Pope, “How dare you? You know, you're behaving in such horrible ways.” So she's so brave. She's got a platform where she can kind of have a go at world leaders. That's how powerful she is. But on top of all of that, she's writing medical tracts. She's writing cures, how to cure people. She's a scientist, and then she's writing music. The most stunning music, it survives. You can still listen to it. If you go on YouTube and ask for “Hildegard of Bingen music,” it its gorgeous! And she even invents her own language. The woman is off the scale, but we don't know about her because she's a woman and she's medieval.

JVN // So what the fuck? So she, so she lives all the way until 1098 for 81 years. So she lives until, like, 1170 or something?!

JANINA RAMIREZ // Yeah, yeah, yeah—'79, I think it is, yeah.

JVN // So she sees an unbelievable amount of stuff in her life that's, like, such a long life.

JANINA RAMIREZ // Yeah. She does. And she, she's really lucky because they put together, like, her collected works in this massive, massive manuscript that you can't even lift. The reason it wasn't nicked during World War Two is because it was too heavy to grab. That's how big this manuscript is. And everything's in this manuscript. So that's why she's, that's why we know of her. But what I am trying to say is there's a Hildegard of Bingen that we *know* about because this book survives. But think about the tens of thousands of books that haven't survived and the tens of thousands of women that were *like* her, doing similar things to her that we don't know about. We got to get, we got to change our assumption of this period, repopulate it with this cast of extraordinary people. You know, people of the past have always been as complex, diverse, challenging, interesting as we are today. They just did it before us. And I think we, we do them a disservice when we think about them through rose tinted lenses or some artifact in a museum. They're not! They're us—they're difficult. They're they're interesting. They fall in love. They have feelings. That's when you really connect with history, I think.

JVN // So let's talk more about her, cause this manuscript was gigantic. There's a lot in there. So, like—and also, she shifted pronouns in her writing, like?!

JANINA RAMIREZ // Yeah, she's shifting—her whole kind of grip on gender is so fascinating. On the one hand, she is for the women. So she sets up these incredible, like, convents. They're, like, palaces of luxury where they sing and they dress up and they put on plays and they have a wonderful lifestyle and they read and they write. And that's all about

the women, sisters doing it for themselves. And even the hymns that she writes, you know, bigging up other women who've come before. But then on the other hand, when she's talking about spiritual matters, she deliberately collapses the difference between the genders. She sees it as deeply unfair that God has to be thought of as a man, because then that immediately excludes 50% of the population from being able to connect with God in that way. So she brings in, like all these characters into her spiritual realm that are male, female, bit of both, shifting between the two. She draws the images of, of sort of divine figures that have a man's face and then, you know, shifts to a woman, and then it shifts back to a man, all in one. So she's sort of collapsing that gender divide in the spiritual realm.

And she does it in her language as well. So I said she invents the language, but yeah, she deliberately kind of plays around with pronouns in her works and shifts between them. So she's just—she wouldn't have had the terms. We have to describe these things. She wouldn't have known about feminism, she wouldn't have known about, about describing things as transgender. But she is she's playing, she's exploring them. She's trying to think about them and understand them in her own way. And the women's thing is mad because she worked in the infirmary at Disibodenberg, where she, when she learned a lot of her medicine, a lot of her cures through healing people over 30, 40 years. And then she set up these single-sex spaces where she was working on women's bodies and she was learning more and more about women's bodies. So she writes some of the earliest kind of gynecological stuff out there. She has a really distinct understanding of how a woman's body works. And yeah, even though she's a nun, she gives the first ever written description of a female orgasm. And it's pretty close, I have to say, it's pretty bang on!

JVN // How does she describe it! She's giving it to herself?

JANINA RAMIREZ // What Hildegard writes about when she talks about female orgasm. She's writing about it in a medical sense from the point of view of a woman and a man having sex to conceive a baby. The way she describes it is, like, when the, the man's seed goes inside the woman, it creates a reaction that the, that her vagina basically wants to hold onto it. So it squeezes up and goes tight, like a, like a fist, like, pulling at a fist. And that's it holding on to the seed—

JVN // Okay!

JANINA RAMIREZ // So—I know, it's quite, pretty—like I said, it's pretty bang on on. But she's, she's really cool with the way that she is able to go there. And, and, you know, in her frame, she's talking about heterosexual sex between a husband and wife, but she's a nun. We can only speculate where she gets this information from. It might've been someone visited her, told her. It might have been somebody in the infirmary told her. It might have been that she has experience in that regard. We don't know. But she's very, very open about these issues. And yeah, it's I mean, I think even today when we think about issues like abortion, it's seen as the church's stance that abortion is absolutely wrong. Hildegard of Bingen, distributed by the Pope, recognized by the Pope, recognized as a Saint. She writes a recipe of how to abort a baby. She's writing about it because she's concerned with women's health.

And she's saying, "If a woman finds herself pregnant and it's going to cause damage to the woman or it will cause her death or something awful to happen to her, then she has to get rid of the baby. So this is how you'd go about doing it." So it's all—her book is called *Causes and Cures*. So she's trying to kind of come up with, with cures. But in that case, I mean, is this a woman, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years ago doing

something that we still struggle to talk about today? It's, it does ask, you know, beg the question of when are these things invented? When are we saying that it's not cool to do this? Is it a modern invention? When do we trace it back to. So she challenges so many of our assumptions. The more you read Hildegard, the more you just think, "Wow, this totally flies in the face of what I thought the church was, what I thought the medieval world was, and what I thought women's role in the past was."

JVN // Would it be considered—or how could it be complicated to consider Hildegard, like, a feminist icon?

JANINA RAMIREZ // Yeah, I don't think it's complicated. Feminists have been, like, banging the drum for Hildegard for a while, and, and she is, she's it's a rallying point for people, but she's a feminist icon but she wouldn't have understood the concept of feminism as such. God is a feminist icon.

JVN // Got it! Ah, got it, got it, got it.

JANINA RAMIREZ // I mean, for us now, it's. It's hard because part of my job is to say, "Hildegard's amazing. You should know about her. She's genius." Then part of my job is to say, "But hang on a minute. Let's not just look at one person. Let's think about this person in society. Let's think about all the other people around them." Hildegard would not have got to where she got to for 81 years if it wasn't for the men and women around her bigging her up, supporting her, giving her a platform, giving her a voice. This whole society is sort of part of her success. And alongside her, we've got other women—in convents, you know, in palaces, all along the Rhine—that are all doing similar things. There's a group run by an abbess called Herrad, not far from where Hildegard is. And they're putting together this enormous scientific encyclopedia. And there's even a picture of all the women involved. It's like a head shot of the editorial team, you know? So she's not a lone voice. She's part of this vibrant, intellectual community. And finding her helps us find everybody else. That's what I want to do with my form of kind of writing about women. It's not about binaries. It's not about pulling people apart. So, "Men do this and women do this." I want to find humanity in its complexity. And we're all so fluid. And even in our own lifetime, we're so fluid. So I sort of express that, that that's how we should be looking at the past as well.

JVN // Fuck yes, Janina. And if you guys, like, haven't figured out the you have to, like, read this book yesterday, then you're fucking, I don't even know what your problem is at this point. So okay, so she gets us through 1071. So what's happening in, like, the 11s to the 13s? Is there gay stuff? Is there, like, what's going on after Hildegard dies? Like, what's, like, where do we go next in the book.

JANINA RAMIREZ // On the back of Hildegard of Bingen over the next couple of centuries, loads of women are going, "Hey, I'm a visionary. Listen to me, I'm a visionary, I'm a mystic." And there's this sort of rise of superstar celebrity mystics.

JVN // By that point is England, like, fully Christianized by, like, the end of the Middle Ages?

JANINA RAMIREZ // Yeah, pretty much everywhere is. The last parts of Europe to kind of really convert is Iceland. And that's happening around the time of the millennium. The Vikings' countries, they sort of slowly accept it around the year 1000. So yeah, and as I say, it's Christianity with its variants, but yeah, they're logic is still—and so I tell the story of Margery Kempe, you have to read the book because I think Margery Kempe might be one

of my favorite characters from history. She is mad, larger than life, absolutely incredible. The reason we know about her, this is the accident of survival. There is no way that *The Book of Margery Kempe* would—*should* have survived. It should have been but destroyed by all the subsequent centuries of witch trials and modern enlightenment. But it got hidden in a cupboard in this stately home in England. And tucked in that cupboard was this tiny little autobiography, the earliest autobiography written in English, written by a woman. And she is—oh, my goodness. She is all over the shop. She talks about sex all the time, but she is in a sexual relationship with Jesus, and Mary and the disciples go to her imagined wedding. They are her wedding guests.

So everything Marjorie's is doing, she's couching it within Christian thought. So her lover is Jesus. She talks about seance and everything. But, but there's another aspect to this, which is that through reading her book and through reading the work of the mystics, what we're seeing all these women of the world, they talk a lot about travel. She goes, honestly, her journeys, right, in her lifetime, Margery travels from England up to Sweden all the way along to the countecellar through Spain and France. She goes all the way down through Italy, all the way over to Poland, and she goes to Jerusalem. So this is a woman of the world. And she's not even a rich woman. She's probably kind of well-off. But people are moving, traveling. They're encountering different cultures. So Margery encounters Saracens and Muslims, and she kind of, she sees the world and then she brings that back with us. Again, we're told that the medieval world is a dark, ignorant, closed off place. It wasn't at all. And these mystics, these visionary women, they are exploiting these connections, too—they're sort of international superstars, you know. And so we've got her. And then you've got a load of others that carry on into the 14th century and then the Black Death happens.

JVN // Yes, the Black Death! When the fuck is that? Also the Crusades! Also the Crusades! When were those?

JANINA RAMIREZ // Okay, so the Crusades are starting in the 1100s. Pope Urban starts them off in around the 1120s and sends out the first crusades. Up first, it is, "Bah! Christians are going to take back Jerusalem from the Muslims," and, and it's not particularly successful, but of all of them, it's moderately successful. And then as we go through the 1200s, right the way through the 1200s, it's getting less and less successful. More and more money is being pumped into it. More and more soldiers are dying. There's sort of, every town and city in the, in Europe has a dearth of men because all the men have gone off on cruise sites. So the women are going, "Alright," bit like in the world wars, the women are going, "Alright, well, we'll have to do everything then, won't we?" So there's a whole sort of shift, gender shift that's happening because of the Crusades. And then ultimately the, the Albigensian Crusade, which is the one I write about in the book, that's Christians turning on Christians in France. So they're not even going over there to, to fight their, their "enemy," they're staying home.

JVN // So first, the Crusades are, like, Europeans going more to the Middle East

JANINA RAMIREZ // Absolutely.

JVN // And then over time it ends up coming back more and they're just fighting each other.

JANINA RAMIREZ // Yeah, it's literally you've just got displaced men. They're out of pocket. They spend all their money going on the Last crusade. I didn't get anything back from it.

What can we do? Pope goes, "Fine, well there's these heretics down in the south of France. Why don't you go grab their land and their money and have that instead?" It's really grim. And, and it's a part of the Crusades. We don't talk about that. They turn on each other. So we've done that. And then society is sort of moderately getting bumbling along. Okay as we're going through the early 1300s, and then we hit the mid-1300s and that is the time of which the Black Death decimates Europe. It's probably coming in from, we think, trades—maybe traveling on boats with rats, although the rats get a bad rap. It's very possible it would have transmitted human to human anyway and, and it decimates anywhere between a third and half of the population.

JVN // So did a. Uh, my brain. Do we have historical evidence of, like, where it started first? Like, did it pop up in England first or, like, Italy first or, like, France? Or do we have, like, multiple reports from around the same time in different places?

JANINA RAMIREZ // It's sort of radiating out, it seems to be traveling in from sort of Eurasia. And then, and then it seems to hit Italy and, you know, the low countries and then it finally gets to England, 1349-ish. And it's at that point that and over the course of those days that year, you have such devastation. That seems to be the high point. But then there are subsequent plagues. And this is what people also don't really talk about: "The Plague" is that, that sort of major spell of a couple of years where the Black Death is moving across. But in the following 10, 15, 20 years, there are different elements of the plague. So if you talk about COVID having variants, the plague had variants, so there's a variant that hits in the 1360s which attacks children. And so you can't really see when it ends. It must have felt so hard to live through that you've already had the initial kind of wave of destruction, and then it doesn't seem to sort of pick up. But so the negatives that happened, one of the major things that does happen is there's huge social upheaval.

It really rattles the system, because landowners and land workers are dead but food still needs to be grown, things still need to be made. So what ends up happening is the people who are left behind start saying, "Alright, we haven't got 100 peasants to work that field. If you pay me, I'll go and do it for you." So you start to get people knowing, like, being able to command wages, shifting their social, you know, social mobility, moving around. So in some ways the people that survive are quite liberated. And if you were to ask most historians about when you would put a pin in and say, "That's when women had it best, up until the suffragettes," they would probably put a pin in the late 14th century and in the sort of 1350s to 1400s, that's where Margery Kempe is doing her thing. That's when one of my other favorites, Julian of Norwich is doing her thing. So there are real, like, obviously mass, mass trauma, devastation, and then this social transformation that happens as a result.

JVN // And then if you survived the Black Death, like, would you not get it again? Like, was that, like, a big win of, like, surviving it, or did people, like, get it once and then die the second time?

JANINA RAMIREZ // No, yeah, in the first wave, yeah. If you survived, it was very rare. But if you did survive, you were okay. You've been exposed to it. You're okay. You might be subject to a later variant, but yeah, you've, you've got through that first bit. When we get to the 1400s, it gets easier to find commoners, to find other people. And that's, the, the chapter I write on that in the book is all about this Black Death cemetery in Spitalfields. And it is so fascinating, right? I imagine. I mean, even me, I've been a medievalist for, like, 20 odd years. When I visualize medieval London, I try and see it in its complexity, in its diversity, but I compare it with modern London and I think, "Oh my God, modern London's, like, really, really ethnically diverse. It's got a lot of religions, a lot of people in it that are

from different backgrounds. You know, it's got diversity." I wouldn't imagine 14th century London to have that.

Anyway, in the book I writes about this study that was done of this Black Death cemetery, and they've been able, for the first time ever, using this new data basing system that they've got for DNA analysis to chart the origins of the people in, through their DNA. You can show where they grew up. You can show where they died, what food they ate, what illnesses they had, and they're all being uploaded. And particularly this idea of origin—where these people come from—has proved useful to kind of giving a sense of the complexion of this place. So after the Black Death in London, in a Spitalfields cemetery, they did an analysis of the, the people in those graves. And today, in a modern day census of London, the split between whites and non-whites in London is about 60% to 40%. In this cemetery, as a snapshot of life in the middle—in the 1340s—you had 70% white and 30% non-white. Now, that is far more diverse than I think most people would have imagined a medieval period to be.

JVN // That's really—and even one other thing that you touched on earlier is it's, like, because we talk a lot about, like, white supremacy, like, the far right, like, nationalism, racism. And we've also talked in some previous episodes about, like, like, drinking culture in, like, Greece and Rome and, like, I had my phase of being obsessed with that, you know, years ago—way before TikTok made it interesting. But she, they were really into explaining to us, like, what diversity looked like and sounded like, you know, *then*, you know, it wasn't necessarily the same as now. And also, you know, some of our other historian, it's like, let's not conflate the slavery that was happening in the Middle Ages with what happened, you know, post in the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery.

JANINA RAMIREZ // Yeah, and also what's really coming out of the evidence as well is it's—you've got, like, Black bishops, you've got, like, Black people in the court, you've got, it's totally, and actually, the concept of slavery, you know, I discuss it in the book, it's really interest, intricate. It never goes away, and it has different complexions, and there's different types of people. The Vikings are terrible for it. I mean, my God, they're moving people around *constantly*. But definitely in terms of the population of London, the sense is that it's not, it's actually, *that* sort of diversity that comes around through movement of people, natural movement of people, people moving in and out and making connections and creating this sort of colourful and diverse city, much like London is today.. And I think that just seeing that city in a different way made me think about the medieval period in a different way. I sort of saw it, again, as being not quite the kind of whitewashed, alt-right version of the medieval period that I'm so scared of and trying to avoid.

I think it's, you know, that's the other thing. I think we—I really just want to have these conversations, and sometimes they're difficult conversations to have and sometimes, you know, all the way through this podcast, I've been talking to you about things that are religiously challenging. We talked about things that are challenging in terms of sex and gender. And then we you know, here in this, in that chapter about the Black Death, I was thinking about things that are challenging in terms of race and identity. And, and then at the very, very end of the book, I bring in a character called John / Eleanor Rykener, which is an account again, from London in the 14th century. So I've tried to kind of resolve the book with London at this time of such great change. And this is the report of a person who has been arrested for conducting sexual acts in a street in London. And the person is identified as John Rykener in this account. But John refers to themselves as Eleneanor Rykener. And in the, the—in their account of this arrest, there's this confusion on the part. You could definitely feel the confusion on the part of the scribe that's writing down this

legal treaties because at one point, I'll call, I'll call them Eleanor, because that's the name they've chosen for themselves. At one point, Eleanor talks about being a prostitute, working for another woman, learning the skills of prostitution and going with men as if they were a woman. And then other times they talk about sleeping with women as, you know, as a man.

So this just this very short account is a fascinating instance from the 14th century of a person who was, was en masse sort of thinking about their gender and trying to find the words, the vocabulary to express it in these law courts, which makes it just such a fascinating discovery. I mean, it was hidden in an archive in London for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years until this particular academic happened to be looking through that roll and then found this account. And what's funny is the person who'd recorded the roll, that particular roll, in printed form had edited it out. They'd made no mention of the fact that this, that there was a John and Eleanor and that this was a discussion on gender. They just wrote it up as, "A man gets in trouble for, for illicit acts." So, you know, that was edited down again. It's so amazing—there's discoveries hiding everywhere. And, you know, all these these things I've tried to write about that just, ah, they're just happening! They're, you know, they're happening before our eyes. We can see new evidence that we just didn't have before.

JVN // So, when you're researching this and you're saying, you know, "new discoveries are being made all the time," y'all are just, like, are you consulting? Like, what was your archival research? I mean, you were, like, tracking down, up fields in Germany and shit and looking, like, like, how would you find this stuff?

JANINA RAMIREZ // Well, I think it really helps that I've right from the beginning, being an interdisciplinary scholar. So I kind of work in history, but I work with theology, I work with archeology, I work with art history, I work with literature, and having all that evidence, that's the best we can do for the medieval period, because it's not like—if I wanted to look back 100 years, I'd have, you know, it would take me in terms of just looking at newspapers from the year 1901, that would probably do me. That would be enough. But I don't have the luxury of that amount of documentary evidence. And I don't think you understand what it's like to be in a time and a place unless you immerse yourself in it. Like, if I was to describe what it's like to be alive now to someone in 100 years, I wouldn't say, "Oh, just read the front page of the Times." That's not going to tell you what it's like to be alive. You want to know about the music, the fashion. You want to know about what films people are watching. You know, what people are into. That's what being alive in the moment is all about. And that's what I try and do with the source material. I try and pull it together from all different places and build, build a picture of the past up.

JVN // Ah! What's so, so you're getting into a new book about suffragettes. It's still medieval, but it's also the suffragette movement. So that's kind of what's happening next.

JANINA RAMIERZ // Yeah, the fascinating thing is the suffragettes, they based themselves on what's come before. And these amazing suffragettes were medievalists. They loved the medieval period and they were passionate about women getting back the rights that they felt that women had in the medieval period. So that's when it all started to come together for me. I was, like, "Oh, it's just, it's like a Russian doll opening up and opening up!"

JVN// I am obsessed, I can't handle. Where can people follow you? Like, are you the most active on the 'gram, X? Are you up on TikTok? Where do we need to find you?

JANINA RAMIREZ // We're calling it X now. No, I think I'm on most—

JVN // No, we're not going to X. We're not, because that's what Elon wants. So we're really calling it Twitter.

JANINA RAMIREZ // I don't want to give him what he wants! It's Twitter to me! I'm on Twitter, so, @DrJaninaRamirez, and Janina is spelt with a J. @DrJaninaRamirez.

JVN // Thank you so much for coming on. We love you so much. Thank you so much for coming on Getting Curious, and I can't—we're going to have to have you back to talk about suffragettes. I just have loved talking to you. I mean, thank you so much for all of your scholarship and work and thank you for including us. And we just love you so much.

JANINA RAMIREZ // Oh, I love you, too. And I love everyone that's listening. Everyone loved you all. You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. You can learn more about this week's guest and their area of expertise in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. You can follow us on Instagram @CuriousWithJVN. And can I just say, our social work has been so good, we are just slaying over there, so give us that follow. You can catch us here every Wednesday. Make sure to tune in every Monday for alternating episodes of Curious Now and Pretty Curious. Still can't get enough, honey? Neither can I. Subscribe to Extra Curious on Apple Podcasts for commercial-free listening, and our subscription only show, "Ask JVN," where we're talking sex, relationships, and so much more. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. Our engineer is Nathanael McClure. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, Chris McClure, and Allison Weiss, with production support from Julie Carillo, Anne Currie, and Chad Hall.