

[Transcript] The Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling / Chapter 3: A New Pyre

This episode contains language that might not be suitable for children.

Can you talk to me about some of the threats that you've received over the past few years?

There have been a lot.

A huge amount, as every woman will know who speaks up on this issue, a huge amount of, I want her to choke on my fat trans dick.

You know, like, very sexualized abuse.

I don't think all of them mean it literally,

but attempts to degrade, to humiliate,

people might say, well, that's not really a threat.

And you know what, up to a point, you're probably right, though it's very unpleasant to be on the receiving end of it, particularly in the quantities I've had it.

Then I have had direct threats of violence.

And I have had people coming to my house,

when my kids live, and I've had my address posted online.

I've had what the police anyway would regard as credible threats, yeah.

The pushback is often, you are wealthy, you can afford security,

you haven't been silenced, all true, right, all of that's true.

But I think that misses the point.

The attempt to intimidate and silence me

is meant to serve as a warning to other women.

And I say that because I have seen it used that way.

I have seen other women, and other women have told me and literally had someone say this to me the other day.

I was told, look, look what happened to JK Rowling.

Watch yourself.

Chapter three, a new pyre.

I didn't have internet at all when Philosopher's Stone came out.

So around about 98, I did have internet,

but would use it to look stuff up like most of us do,

and I would use it for email.

But I think some sort of unconscious spirit of self-preservation

had stopped me going and looking at Harry Potter

till the point where the internet fandom cropped up in interviews,

and I thought, well, I need to know about this

because I can't be ignorant about this.

I need to know, well, I mean,

I went online for the first time.

And I just had no idea.

I just fell into this universe.

How deep into the fandom are you?

Very.

How many times do you think you've read the books?

10 to 15 times through the series.

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The magic came from the first book,
and there was just no turning back.
I'm Megan Phelps Roper,
and we begin today in Orlando, Florida at LeakyCon.
LeakyCon is one of dozens of Harry Potter conventions
that are held around the world every year.
Okay, so we are at LeakyCon 2022,
and it is pretty packed.
I've been a fan since, I think, 1998,
so I really grew up with Harry Potter.
And like many of these events,
it takes place in a convention hall
filled with a bunch of people who are dressed up
as characters from the books.
So I'm dressed up as Buck Beak today,
and I'm here with my husband, who's Serious Black.
And then we have our witch hats and our wands.
I have my own prescription Harry Potter round glasses.
They sell handmade merchandise,
they have meet-ups, and they even get tattoos.
This is just like my first childhood memory.
And how many Harry Potter tattoos do you think you've done?
Way too many to count.
And when you ask them,
a lot of these fans are quick to say
that it wasn't just Harry Potter that brought them together.
It was the community they found surrounding it.
A lot of the community here at LeakyCon,
they were my friends growing up.
We were all online.
Specifically, on the Internet.
I think Harry Potter is so special
because it was coming out right when everyone was getting online.
Harry Potter, which would go on
to become the best-selling book series of all time,
just happened to be published right as many people
were getting their first introduction to the Internet.
And so there is a generation of people
who grew up alongside both the characters in the books
and the ever-expanding power and influence of this new technology.
Pretty much as soon as I got on the Internet,
somehow, at age 12, I must have Googled Harry Potter.
In fact, for many fans,
Harry Potter was their gateway to the Internet.

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It was the first thing they ever looked up on Yahoo or Google.
It was their first email address.
We were able to talk to people from around the world
and meet people that have the same interests as us.
It was their first time talking to another person online.
The first time they made a screen name.
I was going to mugglenet.com every day to get the updates,
talking on message boards,
writing fanfiction on fanfiction.net.
And it was just such a special experience
to get to connect with so many people
who you didn't know necessarily,
but who felt the same passion for Harry Potter.
One of the things I think you have to understand about Harry Potter
is it is one of the biggest fan experiences
that modern culture has to offer.
This is Helen Lewis, staff writer at The Atlantic,
where she writes and reports about politics and Internet culture.
At this peak, there were people writing
hundreds of thousands of Harry Potter fanfiction stories,
so taking the characters from Harry Potter
and writing your own stories for them.
I was equally fascinated and alarmed, if I'm honest.
Rowling says that when she saw the way her books were colliding
with the still quite new Internet,
much like her reaction to the book's surprise success,
she was taken aback, but also really intrigued.
What connections did you see people specifically,
you know, making with the books?
Well, there was the really sweet sorting of yourself into houses,
which I think speaks deeply to children,
and also to adolescents.
Are you wearing yellow because you identify as a Hufflepuff?
Yes, 100%.
There was obviously the championing of different romantic combinations,
which was very sweet.
Why Hermione and Draco?
Who did not want the bad boy?
We can change him.
That was everybody's fantasy, right?
Little groups of mutual support were made.
You know, real friendships were made.
If you ever want to feel good about the world,
go search the Internet for Friendships Forged by Harry Potter.

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There are so many places where fans are just gushing.
Like one user says,
my best friends in high school were a group of people I met
because we loved talking about Harry Potter online.
I'm so happy that I'm alive at the same time as the Internet.
I watched it happening.
I could see really beautiful interactions happening online.
And, you know, in later years, I've met people.
I met my best friend on MuggleNet.
You know, my husband and I connected over Harry Potter.
We are wearing our matching shirts from when we got engaged,
and we had a complete Harry Potter wedding
where we wore house robes instead of tuxes.
That's happened time and time again.
And it's just a beautiful thing.
So huge positives came out of that.
The biggest of the early fan websites was called MuggleNet.
It was set up in 1999 by a 12-year-old homeschool kid in Indiana
who could have had no idea how much this site was going to change his life.
And that's partly because Rowling eventually embraced it.
She was one of the first authors, the first creators of any kind, really,
to invest time and energy communicating directly with her fans online,
doing interviews, answering fan questions,
really catering to the community she saw forming there.
But she also told me that, on at least one occasion,
she went into one of these forums anonymously.
So I chose a random name that was not a Potter-related name.
I was almost scared, even though they've all got Potter-related names,
that I would choose a name that was a little, I don't know,
I was just scared I would somehow reveal myself.
So I go into this chat room and people are sharing some theories.
And I gave an opinion that was very bland,
and I got rounded on by users who told me in no uncertain terms
just to get out, I'm not familiar in that room,
I'm clearly an idiot who doesn't know anything.
But I genuinely, and I left, I left.
And I was thinking, do you know what, I promise you this is what I thought.
I thought, I've written three and a half books,
I think it would have been at that time,
where bullying is such a thing from the very first page,
where bullying and authoritarian behaviour
is held to be one of the worst of human else.
And look what just happened.
And these people who call themselves such fans of this franchise,

what if I'd been a 12, I didn't care,
I was a pretty robust person,
but what if I'd been some 12-year-old
who's excited to go into this room
and is immediately, caustically, chastised for not belonging.
Just kick someone out because they're new.
And I thought that was so interesting
that you're passionate about these books.
And yet, in the course of living,
you are behaving in a way that I depict
as one of the worst and most dubious human behaviours.
This being the early days of the internet,
it was also the early days of a kind of social behaviour
that we now generally know as trolling.
There were definitely individual trolls
on the MuggleNet forums, purely there to be objectionable.
And even though they were just this small part of the community,
it was a fringe, but it was definitely there.
Rolling noticed that they did seem to have outsized power.
At first, I thought it's kind of amusing
that this is how you're spending your time,
but as time went on, I started to really see it as bullying.
There was an edge of picking off vulnerable people.
And I was very aware, by that time, early 2000s,
that a lot of kids who felt themselves to be outsiders,
who were vulnerable, were finding themselves in Potter.
Why do you like Harry Potter?
He felt like an outsider and he felt like he didn't belong,
and that really resonated with me.
I had not such a great childhood,
and I think a kid with not such a great childhood
actually escaped to something else in a book.
Many of the people that like Harry Potter
tend to be the ones outside,
especially if you're a child that isn't well-loved.
I felt protective of those people,
so watching trolls operate in those spaces
increasingly did not amuse me.
It began to concern me.
Both of us had challenging, crappy upbringing and childhoods,
and when you talk to people that are like the really crazy fans,
I feel like that's something that comes up more often than not.
And I think Harry Potter was one of the things
that was just a ways there for people.

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You grow up feeling like the weird one of the bunch, but then you realize there's so many other people out there like you, and then you don't feel so alone anymore, you know?

So that's the best part about Harry Potter.

And indeed, I actually ended up in long-term pen pal relationships with some of those people.

I can remember a situation where a young person had written a letter that resulted in my then assistant and I calling that child school.

We were very, very concerned that this child might be about to kill themselves.

I just was hyper aware, and I remain hyper aware that the Potter books were a refuge for some people who were for very different reasons, very vulnerable.

One of the groups that really gravitated both to the Harry Potter books and to the online fandom were gay teenagers.

The president of the Human Rights Campaign, the largest gay rights lobbying organization in the U.S., once referred to Rowling as a writer whose work has inspired countless LGBTQ young people to imagine a world of acceptance and inclusivity.

Were you surprised by the way that gay teenagers in particular really started to connect with the books?

Did that surprise you at all?

Honestly, it didn't because the amazing thing about the Wizarding World is you walk through that wall in Diagon Alley, and while human nature remains the same and that's something that I was setting out to depict, human nature remains the same.

If you can do magic, the ludicrous things that we discriminate about in the Muggle world really are utterly immaterial.

What do you think were the messages in your book that misfits people who felt like outsiders?

What messages were they connecting with?

I think that some of the most sympathetic characters, like Lupin, for example, who, you know, are stigmatized through something that he can't help, can't control, some of the most sympathetic characters are people who are grappling with things that may be stigmatized, and they're all imperfect.

Harry has anger issues.

Ron can be, I think I call him a git quite a lot in the books,

but together they are more than the sum of their parts.
Together they grow, they find family in each other,
and there's real human beauty in that.
I suppose the Dursleys are my epitome of a very authoritarian
and conformist world that demands absolute obedience,
and that's not the world you enter when you go to Hogwarts.
Our grade in school was the same year each book came out,
so my exact class almost grew up with Harry.
Like, we were 11 when Harry was 11.
You know, as each book came out,
these characters figured out a lot of normal life things
right along with us.
Many fans credit the morals of the books
with helping shape their morals growing up.
Friendship and loyalty and bravery
and doing the right thing when the right thing is hard to do.
The way people pull together, they're different,
they don't all exactly agree with one another,
but they can say, okay, this is the common good
and this is what we're going to work for.
We need a whole lot more of that.
And as they got older and went from middle schoolers
lined up at the midnight release parties
to young adults heading off to college,
some of those morals also became more mature.
Things like media literacy,
understanding when maybe the media is lying to you
and having to really think critically.
To many of these fans,
Rowling became something of a moral authority in their lives,
giving them this series to grow up with
and being this figure that they could look up to.
I idolized her for a really long time.
She was a great feminist icon.
Online, we called her Joe
because we felt like we were on a first name basis.
I think a lot of us actually kind of feel like
she was our mom in some ways.
She was just the mom of the Harry Potter fandom.
I became aware that I was to an extent
becoming an idealized figure
and probably an idealized mother figure.
And that is a complex position to find yourself in.
And for me particularly it's complex

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because I am a maternal person.
It's not that they're seeing something in me that isn't there
and I have had quite maternal relationships
with some individual fans
who have been going through bad times.
But to be idealized
is not something I want.
I am a human being.
I couldn't have written these books if I weren't a human being
and aware of human frailty and human imperfection.
And I'm very aware
that idealization comes at a price.
Last summer, in a grand celebration of literature,
Harvard Square and Harvard Yard
was transformed into Hogwarts Square.
This summer festival celebrated the midnight release
of Harry Potter and the Deathly Hollows.
I want to talk about your 2008 commencement address at Harvard.
At this point you are about ten years
since the days you were struggling in that small flat.
You had become one of the most beloved authors of all time
and you're speaking at the most prestigious school in America,
arguably the world.
Her books have set sales records
and have won many awards.
Probably because the Harry Potter stories
provide a familiar backdrop for readers who can empathize
with the young protagonist adrift
in a sometimes cruel and challenging world.
And so at this point, for better or for worse,
you do seem to be seen as a moral leader
and the person who introduces you says this actually.
In addition to her vast contributions to literature,
she is also noted for the social, moral,
and political inspiration she has given her fans.
A notable philanthropist.
And it's a remarkable thing to go back and watch.
And now I give you Ms. J.K. Rowling.
You're up there dressed in robes,
standing in front of this generation
that grew up alongside Harry Potter,
and you're talking to them as they are launching into the world.
The first thing I would like to say is thank you.
Not only has Harvard given me an extraordinary honor,

but the weeks of fear and nausea I have endured
at the thought of giving this commencement address
have made me lose weight.
On this wonderful day when we are gathered together
to celebrate your academic success,
I have decided to talk to you about the benefits of failure.
And as you stand on the threshold
of what is sometimes called real life,
I want to extol the crucial importance of imagination.
And your speech is very personal and vulnerable.
Now I'm not going to stand here and tell you that failure is fun.
That period of my life was a dark one.
So why do I talk about the benefits of failure?
Simply because failure meant a stripping away of the inessential.
I was set free because my greatest fear had been realized,
and I was still alive,
and I still had a daughter whom I adored,
and I had an old typewriter and a big idea.
And so rock bottom became the solid foundation
on which I rebuilt my life.
But you also challenged them.
Now you might think that I chose my second theme,
the importance of imagination,
because of the part it played in rebuilding my life,
but that is not wholly so.
I have learned to value imagination in a much broader sense.
In its arguably most transformative and revelatory capacity,
it is the power that enables us to empathize with humans
whose experiences we have never shared.
You tell them that they need to be empathetic
to people who are not like them.
Unlike any other creature on this planet,
human beings can learn and understand
without having experienced.
What is more,
those who choose not to empathize enable real monsters,
for without ever committing an act of outright evil ourselves,
we collude with it through our own apathy.
We do not need magic to transform our world.
We carry all the power we need inside ourselves already.
We have the power to imagine better.
And the crowd just goes wild.
They love it, and they love you.
But at this point, it's really hard to imagine

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that you would be welcome at Harvard at all,
or that you'd get that kind of reception from that crowd.
And what I want to understand from your point of view
is what changed,
and maybe when did you start to notice it changing?
I would say about a decade ago,
I started to become very interested
in what was going on online
and concerned about what was going on online.
I noticed a real shift.
We'll be right back.
This podcast is supported by Moinkbox.
Before I moved to a tiny farming community nearly a decade ago,
I didn't really have a sense of where my food came from
or how it was raised.
Now I do, because I subscribe to Moinkbox.
Yes, that's Moo plus Oink.
I know a lot of family farmers,
and Moink is a meat subscription box company
on a mission to fight for the family farm.
Located in rural America
and run by an eighth generation female farmer,
Moink meat is better than what's at your typical grocery.
Moink delivers grass-fed and grass-finished beef and lamb,
pastured pork and chicken,
and sustainable, wild-caught Alaskan salmon straight to your door.
As a working mom with an infant, a preschooler,
and a full-time job,
I will do anything to save time, energy, and brain space.
And Moink is a hack I'd recommend to anyone.
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but only for a limited time.
Spelled M-O-I-N-K, that's [moinkbox.com slash witch trials](https://moinkbox.com/slash/witch-trials).
I have been obsessed with mail since I was a little girl.
It always seemed so magical,
these letters and packages from faraway friends and family
just appearing at my house.
Postal workers would take the letters I scrolled
and whisk them away to my globetrotting grandmother.
And that childhood fixation is still going strong.
Don't get me wrong, I love the ease of digital communication too,
but there will always be something special about real mail.

And what's great now is that there's a tool that makes it super easy to ship letters and packages all over. Stamps.com lets you print your own postage and shipping labels right from your home or office, and it's ready to go in minutes, no complicated setup or equipment required. All you need is your normal computer and printer, and it's like your own personal post office. Postage rates just increased again, but luckily Stamps.com has the best discounts in the industry. They have amazing partnerships with the U.S. Postal Service and UPS for unbeatable rates, up to 86% off. Plus, Stamps.com automatically tells you your cheapest and fastest shipping options. If you want to support our show, make your shipping life easier, and set your business up for success, get started with Stamps.com today. Sign up with promo code witchtrials for a special offer that includes a four-week trial, a free postage, and a free digital scale. No long-term commitments or contracts. Just go to Stamps.com, click the microphone at the top of the page, and enter code witchtrials. Hi, my name is Joshua Hirsch, and as COO of the Free Press, I know firsthand just how difficult it can be to manage the operations of a fast-growing business and how important it is for a business to have visibility into and control over its financials, especially in this economic climate. I'd love to tell you about Netsuite. Netsuite, by Oracle, is the number one cloud financial system to power your growth, and is trusted by over 33,000 companies to gain visibility and control of their financials, inventory, HR, planning, budgeting, and more. Netsuite is everything you need to grow, all in one place. With Netsuite, you can automate your processes and close your books in no time, while staying well ahead of your competition.

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So in the early days of the Internet, by definition, the people who were on there were going to be people who are really passionate about the future of computers.

This is writer and Internet historian Angela Nagle, people with a lot of imaginations about what could be the future of computers would be.

So it is the time of the Internet to understand the future of computers and the future of the Internet and how it can be possible to understand the future of computers people with a lot of imagination and maybe tendency towards utopian thinking.

The internet is for me the hope for humanity.

The internet provides everybody a voice and the chance to be heard, which is the whole point about democracy.

They had an idea that the internet would bring democracy and freedom to the world and that it would be impossible for dictatorships and tyranny to co-exist with the internet.

In 2007, when Rowling released the final installment in the Harry Potter series and in 2008, when she gave that address at Harvard, this was a time when internet usage around the world was exploding, both in terms of how many people

were gaining access to the internet
and in terms of how much we used it,
especially because it coincided
with the invention of the smartphone.
And Nagel says that it was also a time
when it seemed like some of those optimistic dreams
of what the internet could usher in were coming true.
I guess the first manifestation
that maybe proved to those utopians
that they could be right
is that you saw things like the Arab Spring
where protesters used social media
to gather in public squares and protest dictatorships
and you also had the election of Barack Obama,
which was very much seen
as the internet generation's president.
I never thought of my lifetime that it would happen,
but it happened tonight.
It's a reality and we did it.
America is now more united, we did it.
People were becoming more progressive
and more multicultural.
Also, there was this very powerful idea
of the global village.
We call humanity as one sort of
in this one collective consciousness on the internet.
But then, then of course, inevitably,
things started to go a little bit weird.
You really have Americans say they feel more
and more like a stranger in their own country.
Politics has, over the last few decades,
increasingly empowered the extremes of political politics.
One more day online.
Often be traced back to the rise of online extremism.
Elected officials have been shot at community media.
This increasing habit of demonizing political opponents
creates a dangerous climate.
Is the internet killing democracy?
So, what happened?
Many people blame this disruptive technology
that we call social media,
which over the last two decades
went from something that barely existed at all
to the single most powerful tool for communication in history,

shaping our politics, our societies,
and our sense of reality.
Now, it is undeniable
that social media has done tangible good,
helping people like me expand our moral circle
and find our partners and friends.
Just a brief homage to social media from me.
It was conversations on Twitter
that helped me leave what many describe as a religious cult,
and it also introduced me to my husband,
the father of my two children.
However, over the past few years,
many, including some of the very optimists
who helped design the internet as we know it today,
have been outspoken in saying that social media
has corrupted the dream
of what the internet could do for the world,
like computer scientist Jaron Lanier,
who argues that social media poses a real threat
to a pluralistic society.
Society has been gradually darkened by this scheme
in which everyone is under surveillance all the time,
and everyone is under this mild version
of behavior modification all the time.
It's made people jittery and cranky.
It's made teens especially depressed,
which can be quite severe,
but it's made our politics kind of unreal.
And he, along with former Google engineer Tristan Harris,
have focused a lot of their concern around social media
on the algorithms and the profit motives of big tech.
There's a tendency to think here
that this is just human nature.
Now, that's just people are polarized,
and this is just playing out.
It's a mirror.
It's holding up a mirror to society.
But what it's really doing is it's an amplifier
for the worst parts of us.
But far less attention has been paid to the question
of where certain polarizing beliefs and norms
began to gain a foothold online.
And the answer turns out to be, in part,
these small, strange,

and fascinating corners of the internet.
When you started writing and doing PhD research
into these smaller, peculiar online subcultures,
did people think you'd lost your mind?
Yeah, definitely.
I had many, many arguments with people
where they said, oh, what does this matter?
It's just some obscure,
some people on the internet, it's not real life.
And I kept telling people, no, you're getting this wrong.
This is gonna change the world.
This is hugely important,
and it's going to be massively impacting your life
in a few years from now.
In 2017, Angela Nagel published a book
called Kill All Normies,
which helped explain the rise of the alt-right.
But it also revealed, in a powerful way,
this handful of online forums and websites,
places on the internet that most people
had never even heard of or spent any real time on,
and how they've come to have a profound impact
on almost every aspect of our politics and society.
So in my book, I focused on two main forums,
because I felt that they were possibly the most influential,
and they also represented very politically different groups.
The first of these two forums was Tumblr.
I was fascinated by Tumblr culture,
and for those who don't know,
Tumblr is a microblogging website,
and it's very popular with young women.
Which was also one of the key places where Rowling says,
she started to notice these changes online.
I started to be intrigued by the use of the word identify.
This was something I was seeing rising in culture,
particularly from the younger generation.
And I don't see that as necessarily a malign thing,
because I think we all have an identity,
and identity is important to all of us
for a stable sense of self.
But I was noticing something that I thought was interesting,
and then that began to disturb me.
Tumblr went live in 2007,
and it gained some popularity in the early 2010s.

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The whole idea of the site was built off of the popularity of blogging or online journaling. But unlike other blogging sites, Tumblr tapped into what would eventually make social media so addictive. Tumblr is like Twitter but longer, so you can re-blog people's content. Again, Helen Lewis, staff writer at The Atlantic. So it has a kind of viral element to it, but it was also very image-based. Tumblr was kind of a cross between Instagram and Twitter. And for early Tumblr users, it was just as addictive as those apps would eventually become. And these people on Tumblr largely fit into a few different groups. One of them was fans, fans of Twilight and Doctor Who, and, of course, a ton of Harry Potter fans. But here, they no longer had to log into chat rooms or poke around message boards to connect with other fans, because on Tumblr, it was all in one big, scrollable feed. And it became a big place for teenagers to hang out, to draw their own comics, to write their own fan fiction, to engage in all kinds of fandom, essentially, around these big properties. It's also important to know that a lot of the people on Tumblr were anonymous. And over time, the site became inundated with porn. The other big group that was on Tumblr were masturbators. It's a very sexual environment because the moderation was super loose, so that obviously is going to attract the attention of many different groups. This is Catherine D, aka Default Friend, writer, internet historian, and admitted former Tumblr addict. A lot of fetishists and pornographers and sex workers, and you also have a lot of teenagers. It was a very odd place to be sometimes Tumblr because you would have this just endless porn interspersed with very cute Kawaii comics and anime and very kind of infantilized cultures. And you have a lot of, like, horny teenagers who are exploring their sexuality

and they're drawing erotic fan art
or they're even posting photos of themselves.
Years later, Tumblr would be singled out by law enforcement
for being a major source of child pornography online,
and that ultimately forced them to moderate their content.
But back in the early 2010s, it was pretty much a free-for-all.
And then finally, you have the activists
who are giving you new language to describe your experience,
potentially giving you a sense of meaning.
Like other social media sites eventually would,
Tumblr attracted a lot of activists.
And in Tumblr's case, it was activism
particularly around sex positivity and gender identity.
These groups had a huge influence
on a lot of different subcultures
that ended up forming on Tumblr.
And all of that together really creates a tinderbox.
And so this place, full of teenagers and activists
and fans and fetishists and porn,
it wasn't just a place where you could invent a new character
in your Harry Potter fan fiction.
It ultimately became a place where users could create
and experiment with new identities for themselves.
The thing I remember thinking about it most
is it was almost like a huge live-action role-playing game.
Tumblr was a place that was allowing people
to explore these new forms of identification.
I would say that Tumblr is probably most notorious
for generating hundreds of gender identities.
This is Natalie Nguyen,
a popular online commentator better known as ContraPoints.
I am a YouTuber.
That is, I guess, a profession.
And my videos are about social issues
or politics or media.
A lot of it has been focused on gender
because I'm a transgender woman.
I transitioned in 2017
and have been doing videos pretty consistently ever since.
People still talk about, quote, Tumblr genders.
Sometimes this is, oh, there's 76 genders.
That was a meme for years.
You could be lumegender.
That is, having a gender that was illuminating like a light

or ambigender, pangender, xenogender.
They really embraced this idea of genderqueer,
which is a word that was used before non-binary.
There was also a lot of talk about otherkin.
So otherkin were people who said
that although they looked like they were human,
they were actually wolves or dragons.
And they were quite insistent about this,
that this was an identity that you could adopt.
This is where you get people who say things like,
my gender is a cloud.
How much of it was just playfulness
and how much appeared to be like sincere self-discovery?
Well, I think that playfulness is part of self-discovery.
Natalie Nguyen appreciated this aspect of Tumblr.
And she says that it's exactly why some people like her
were drawn to the site.
For a lot of young queer people,
engaging in this imaginative play
about all the possibilities of gender
was like a way for them to experiment
with different imaginative possibilities
or what's possible with gender.
There was a culture that was encouraged on Tumblr,
which was to be able to describe
your unique non-normative self.
Again, Angela Nagel.
And that's to some extent a feature
of modern society anyway,
but it was taken to such an extreme
that people began to describe this as the snowflake,
the person who constructs a totally kind of boutique
and unique identity for themselves,
and then guards that identity in a very, very sensitive way
and reacts in an enraged way
when anyone does not respect the uniqueness of their identity.
And Nagel says that these norms around identity
and this increased sensitivity to identities of all kinds,
it's spread across huge swaths of Tumblr.
So that was very much the culture of Tumblr.
And at the same time,
you had on the other side of the political spectrum,
you could say, the most insensitive culture imaginable,
which was the culture of 4chan.

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Jigsaw for Rambe, you know what the fuck it is.
And the culture of 4chan was really based around
transgression and offensiveness
and the kind of fun of being offensive.
Sigh boy!
Sigh boy!
About like 30 to 45 minutes ago,
I beat the fuck out of my dick, so goddamn hard
that I can't even feel my left leg.
My left leg has a wing.
You know, the entire culture became a sort of a one-upmanship
of who can post the most outrageous or offensive thing
imaginable.
And so they're going to make Holocaust jokes
and they're going to make Anne Frank jokes.
Making an ethno-state is hard work.
I mean, you really gotta ask yourself,
what eugenics programs are you going to use?
What type of plumbing do you use in your internment camps?
So 4chan, if you've never heard of it,
it was actually somewhat similar to Tumblr
in that it was largely anonymous and text and image-based.
There were a lot of fans there, especially anime,
and it had lots of porn and lots of young people.
But where Tumblr attracted a lot of girls and women,
4chan skewed way more male.
Back in 2014, 4chan made headlines
after users there pulled this stunt that
generated some panic about how hackers were
able to access people's private photos in the cloud.
Several A-list stars are the target of what
appears to be one of the biggest celebrity hacking leaks.
Dozens of private nude photographs
were apparently accessed from phones and leaked online.
Jennifer Lawrence and several other celebrities
had their personal nude photos stolen out of the cloud
and leaked on 4chan.
Do we even know who is this 4chan person or website?
He may, and I'm sure we're going to be able to get to that.
Where users shared and sold the nudes,
made gifts and memes out of them,
and celebrated how much attention this got.
So in a lot of ways, the norms and mores of Tumblr and 4chan
end up being these kind of mirror images of one another.

You have this kind of reinforcing culture of ultra-sensitivity on one side and this reinforcing culture of anti-sensitivity on the other side. And both of these cultures are growing at the same time. If you've ever heard a kind of right-wing activist railing against woke culture, then you'll be hearing them condemning phrases that were popularized on Tumblr. Microaggression, trigger warnings, Latinx, non-binary, two-spirit, transgender. You know, even the idea of being cis as opposed to being trans, you know, the idea that everybody was one of those two things. If you dig through the Wayback Machine or Google Analytics, you can see that many of these words and phrases that have become pretty mainstream on the political left and have become the focus of a lot of backlash from the political right. Many of them can be traced back to their increased use on Tumblr. People start Googling them between 2011 and 2014. That's when you see the first spike. And this is also the same period when the use of social media in general was exploding. So more and more people were spending more and more of their time on these platforms. And you can go back and kind of watch how these ideas start to migrate outward from Tumblr. So a good example of this is the word Latinx, right? If you look at early articles about the word Latinx, so these are articles that are coming out between 2013 and 2015, a lot of them reference Tumblr. Gabby Riviera of Autostraddle wrote, the word Latinx has been appearing on my Tumblr dashboard for the last year. The website Latino Rebels also ran an article about the term and they were like, this word comes from Tumblr and we don't like it. It's from the American blogosphere and nobody in Latin America uses it. Even though some of these ideas were openly mocked by many people, others became quite mainstream quite quickly.

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So like when Facebook announced it was suddenly offering like 40 different gender identities and a lot of people were confused. You think it's right to say that essentially they were just catching up to what Tumblr had been doing for years at that point. Oh, of course. Facebook was definitely playing catch up. The idea of privilege was very big. You know, the idea that you have white privilege, male privilege, cis privilege, that really came from Tumblr and has had a sort of odd effect on discourse ever since. And things that we wouldn't have recognized as being offensive suddenly were considered offensive. There's a real culture of like calling not only people, but media properties and the creators of those media properties problematic on Tumblr. And so that's really where you get cancel culture in a sense, which takes sensitivity and the strengthening of taboos to such a point that anyone who transgresses them should be just totally removed from the conversation. People online did discover that there is a kind of clout to be gained from discovering what is problematic about a popular figure. So there used to be a Tumblr blog called Your Fave is Problematic. Your Fave is Problematic was a Tumblr account created in 2013 by an anonymous American high school student. Initially, it was just a place where she would call out celebrities and artists, as well as their hardcore fans on Tumblr. It was just like a list of celebrities or popular figures and all of their sort of social justice sins. There'd be a call out of Jennifer Lawrence, who wore fake dreads for a photo shoot, or Tina Fey for a rape joke on 30 Rock. You know, Justin Bieber did cultural appropriation in this and Miley Cyrus did that. And so if you like them, you're a terrible person. But quickly into this high school Tumblr user's surprise, the account grew massively popular on Tumblr and it started to create these real backlashes

leading to big stars issuing apologies.
And these fandoms that were such a big presence on Tumblr,
they were increasingly turning on the very creators
of the books and films and television shows
that they were such big fans of.
Whether it was Stephanie Meyer,
who wrote the Twilight series and was accused of being racist,
or Anne Rice, who was accused of sexism.
So this is happening over and over and over again,
and people on other parts of the internet
are making fun of Tumblr constantly about it.
And J.K. Rowling was not immune.
First Rowling backlash was in 2016
when she wrote about Native American wizards
and she wrote about skinwalkers,
this idea of malevolent wizards
who disguise themselves as animals.
And the outcry then was about cultural appropriation,
which is a very Tumblr concern, cultural appropriation.
The idea that, you know,
you're borrowing bits and pieces from other cultures,
you know, you're going to a music festival
and you're wearing a Native American headdress
or whatever it might be.
And so in 2016,
J.K. Rowling was accused of Native American appropriation
of appropriating another culture.
And that was the first time I thought,
ah, she is no longer left-wing enough for her fans.
That's interesting.
Do you remember how it felt
when you first started to see those things?
I definitely saw it in the context
of this is happening everywhere.
So I didn't take it super personally.
But I was seeing this happen across the board to artists
and there was a kind of puritanism that was rising,
that to me seemed very illiberal.
So very contrary, I suppose,
to my values, to my core values.
So yeah, it happened to me.
I was watching it happening to other artists.
I was watching it happening to other sort of properties,
creative properties.

And it was inevitable I was going to be hit with it too.

I, was it enjoyable?

No.

Did I take it really personally?

No.

That's the honest answer.

Cancel culture is probably as old as humanity in a way.

But in the style of the internet,

I think Tumblr was very, very central to that.

Your fave is problematic,

even at the peak of its popularity,

only had around 50,000 followers.

The fans who turned on these different creators,

they didn't represent anything close

to the majority view of the artist in the hot seat,

or even the average fan's views.

But then, when the battles on Tumblr

became enmeshed on another platform,

its effects became much more far reaching.

It's only when it gets to Twitter

that it's this monster that is a complete runaway train.

Twitter is like, I don't know,

it's like being on the national mall.

It's like being in Times Square.

That's where you're having these fights, right?

Like the biggest public forum.

You know, every journalist in the world is on Twitter,

practically, and politicians are on it,

public figures are on it.

So that really changes the dynamic.

When it's not fandom wars,

it's like Twitter is politics, full stop.

Twitter had two things that Tumblr lacked.

One was a much larger user base,

and the other was the presence of a huge number of journalists

from around the world.

Those journalists began to pick up these stories,

publishing them in mainstream media outlets,

and so this small group of people

shaped by the norms of Tumblr

appeared to have a much bigger presence in society

than it actually did.

That gave them more of an ability to influence politics,

and it also fueled an aggressive backlash

from places like 4chan.
No! Social justice warrior.
4chan users delighted in developing new ways
to inflict reputational damage on people,
who they saw as embodying these values from Tumblr.
A very common thing, for example,
was raiding a person's Wikipedia page
and filling it up with negative material
or putting out fake revenge pornography,
spreading outrageous lies about people.
They made fake accounts and Photoshopped pictures and videos.
They targeted people in the media,
who they saw as perpetuating the culture of sensitivity Tumblr,
giving more and more power to that side of the debate.
Users on 4chan started doxing them,
swatting their houses, and sending them death threats.
That was sort of very common
from the, let's say, anti-political correctness side.
But then on the other side,
you also had things like getting people fired for a joke
that was a bit off-color, you know,
publicly shaming people for something
that they said many years previous
that has since become politically incorrect.
Is this like the phenomenon of digging up old tweets?
Yes, digging up old tweets,
or one example would be something like,
you find a picture of somebody and they're white
and they're wearing a traditional Chinese dress, right,
at, you know, an event.
And somebody says this is cultural appropriation.
Those kind of deliberate attempts to use
public shaming and moral pressure
to destroy people's livelihoods and careers.
And Nagel says that over time,
the tactics and norms that emerged from these subcultures
that felt embattled,
they began to really shape the language and norms
of internet culture more broadly.
And so we had to deal with a new sort of mean,
cruel quality to the internet.
What's fascinating about this
is that the sensitive, politically correct culture of Tumblr
is driven to greater and greater extremes

because they see the enemy culture
that comes from places like 4chan.
And likewise, the culture of 4chan
is sort of inspired to become more and more extreme
because they see the culture of Tumblr.
And so both are not only reinforcing the culture
within their communities,
but by observing the other side,
they feel more like their political project is necessary.
And therefore, they have to become more and more extreme
in order to fight this evil in the world.
You've talked about what you've described as a witch hunt impulse
when it comes to the dynamics of online cancel culture.
What is that impulse?
And what parallels do you draw maybe to the witch hunts of old?
Well, I think that people...
There's a lot of sources of aggression.
I think that aggression is a basic human instinct.
I think there's a lot of kind of free-form aggression
in search of a target.
Natalie Nguyen has a video with the title,
Cancel Culture, where she goes into detail
about what she sees as some of the underlying
and very human impulses inspiring people on Tumblr and beyond.
Joy discusses this, like, morality can be sadistic.
The sadistic super-ego, he calls it.
And the idea is that you kind of use
that kind of punishing, shaming, moral condemnation.
You know, that becomes an outlet for aggression in itself.
And so I think for people, it can become a way to attack someone
while also kind of feeling good about themselves,
which is a very, I think, tempting place to be, right?
You're trashing someone,
but you feel like you're crusading.
I was starting to think about this a lot.
Subcultures that have their own rigid rules.
Acceptable beliefs, non-acceptable beliefs.
Everything becoming very reductive.
I was also deeply concerned by it,
because to me, it was a rise of the kind of authoritarianism
and lack of empathy that it's in all of my books.
It's in literally every book I write.
If there's one thing that I stand against more than any other,
it is authoritarianism.

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And that cuts across political persuasions,
cuts through atheists all the way through
to various different religions.
So I was definitely seeing that.
And I was becoming really concerned.
I think the first time I became really interested
in what was going on, sort of culturally.
I've taken some time out of my busy schedule,
being fabulous and doing my hair,
to prepare a speech for you.
Well, a few remarks, really.
It was Milo Yiannopoulos.
Feminism is cancer.
Thank you very much.
The outright provocateur, I suppose, you would call him.
In 2016, this battle online really started to move offline.
And for many people, the person who signaled this shift
was an editor from Breitbart,
who essentially was the culture of 4chan in human form.
Milo Yiannopoulos.
I think Milo Yiannopoulos was very much an embodiment
of the moment where the culture of places like 4chan
sort of bursts into the mainstream.
As Milo was booked to speak on college campuses,
he was increasingly met with protesters
demanding that he be stopped,
leading to real political violence.
And I'm watching from across the pond
as he tries to speak on various campuses,
and there are protests, riots.
The campus lockdown has more than 1,000 people
rallying against the appearance of a controversial editor
from Breitbart.
We want, indeed, platformed.
We don't want him to speak at all.
They're using free speech as a justification
to have these fascists come to Berkeley.
And I thought it was a terrible strategic error.
Overnight mayhem on campus,
the University of California, Berkeley erupting in flames
as over 1,000 came out to protest.
And my feeling was, you are giving this man
way more power than he deserves by behaving in this way.
It made Milo look sexier and edgier than he deserved to look.

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Is there anybody in here who hates me?
Yes, there we go. Thank you.
I thought it was a strategically appalling turn.
Get on that platform and eviscerate his ideas.
Get on that platform and expose him for the charlatan that he is.
You push back hard, but you've given him so much power
by refusing to talk.
Milo went from relative obscurity
to being a regular on primetime television
and political talk shows in just a few months.
You know, I have marched in my life.
I've certainly been part of mass movements.
I've signed petitions,
and I've demonstrated in certain ways.
But when it comes to a speaker like that,
I just thought they were undermining their own ends.
In fact, I thought they were serving his purposes
because he was able to walk away from that,
saying, look, they won't even...
They don't dare debate me.
This is how dangerous and edgy I am.
And I don't think we want to cast the outright in that light,
but inadvertently.
That's exactly what they're doing.
I think so, yeah.
Rowling says that she was alarmed watching people
who she saw as being on her side of the political aisle,
behaving in a way that she felt broke
with her deeply held principles,
even when the target was someone who she agreed
was offensive and immoral and a political opponent.
And she started to think that maybe this was something
she needed to speak up about.
I was becoming unnerved by some of what I was seeing.
I thought the way this activist movement is behaving
is troubling me.
But then, she started to see that it wasn't just
her political opponents who were being treated this way.
Let's get up on time!
Let's get up on time!
I was starting to see activists behaving
in a very aggressive way outside feminist meetings.
These are trans activists protesting outside
a feminist meeting.

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They're shouting, Turf! It stands for
Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists.
Donut! Donut! Donut! Donut!
Like, what were they doing?
There was a feminist meeting in which they were
banging and kicking on windows, very threatening.
They were masked.
Which, frankly, is never a good look.
If you're a good guy, you're probably not going to be
standing there in a black balaclava.
I watched that happening and I was deeply disturbed
because now this movement that I started being
interested in, now this is really happening.
It's playing out very fast.
Fuck you!
Fuck you, you ugly piece of shit!
You were going to get your teeth knocked out
in your fucking glasses!
Nobody knows who you are and nobody cares
and you will die alone!
You will die alone! You will learn and help me!
You've been listening to the Witch Trials of J.K. Rowling,
produced by Andy Mills, Matthew Bull, and me,
Megan Phelps-Troper, and brought to you by The Free Press.
Our sincere thanks to you for listening,
and we would love to listen to you too.
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