

**NEW YORK CITY TRANS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

**KYLE LUKOFF**

**Interviewer:** Ric Tennenbaum

**Date of Interview:** June 21, 2017

**Location of Interview:** Brooklyn, New York

**Transcribed by** Jamie Magyar

**NYC TOHP Interview Transcript #027**

**RIGHTS STATEMENT**

The New York Public Library has dedicated this work to the public domain under the terms of a Creative Commons CC0 Dedication by waiving all of its rights to the work worldwide under copyright law, including all related and neighboring rights, to the extent allowed by law. Though not required, if you want to credit us as the source, please use the following statement, "From The New York Public Library and the New York City Trans Oral History Project." Doing so helps us track how the work is used and helps justify freely releasing even more content in the future.

Ric Tennenbaum: Hello. My name is Ric Tennenbaum, and I will be having a conversation with Kyle Lukoff for the New York City Trans Oral History Project in collaboration with the New York Public Library's Community Oral History Project. This is an oral history project centered on the experiences of trans-identifying people. It is June 21, 2017 and this is being recorded at Kyle's apartment in Brooklyn.

Kyle Lukoff: Hi, library!

Tennenbaum: Um, so, to start off, can you tell me a little bit about your childhood?

Lukoff: Uh, sure. It was a long time ago, which I feel very grateful about. Um, I'm not that old. I'm 33, but childhood still feels really long ago, mostly because I was really unhappy during most of it, and I'm really happy now, so that feels like a pretty significant distance. Um, I was born in Illinois—like, outside of Chicago—and my family lived in a really wealthy neighborhood of Illinois called Winnetka until I was five, and then the—our family business went bankrupt and we lost all our money, and had to move. And my parents decided to move us to a suburb about twenty miles north of Seattle, um, ostensibly because we had some family out there, but I'm not really sure if that was the entire reason why. I don't know. Um, we had a nice house with a forest behind it, and I played in that a lot, but I was also really sad all the time. I don't know why. I mostly just liked books, and I didn't like people, so I just read a lot.

Tennenbaum: Do you remember any of your favorite books from that time?

Lukoff: Um, there were always books that I kept in my backpack for like, weeks. I would forget to take them out of my backpack, so I would just end up reading them like, fifty times on the bus ride home from school. Um, one of those books—in middle school I read *Autobiography of a Face* by Lucy Grealy, which was not really for middle schoolers, but that's okay. Um, I read *It* in the fifth grade, by Stephen King, and that messed me up, and I loved it. Um, every *Baby-Sitters Club* book until I got too old for them. *Goosebumps*, [*The*] *Boxcar Children*, um, yeah. I just read—I read a lot of, you know, schlocky mass-market children's literature, um, and then moved on to adult books pretty quickly, because there really wasn't as large of a YA genre back then.

Tennenbaum: And so how did you get introduced to these books?

Lukoff: Which ones?

Tennenbaum: Uh, these mainstream ones, like the Stephen King, the *Goosebumps*, *Baby-Sitters Club*.

Lukoff: Oh, like the—like the kids' books?

Tennenbaum: Mhm.

Lukoff: I have—I have no idea. I have no idea why I picked up that first *Baby-Sitters Club* book, but I was like—you know, I was a third-grade girl in 1993 and like, a sixth-grade girl in 1996. That's like, the prime market for them. Um, I have no idea. I also became—in sixth grade, I think—I became fixated on Helen Keller's autobiography and the autobiography of Ryan White, for some reason, which seems telling now, um, since I didn't know anything about AIDS back then, but I was obsessed with Ryan White. And I didn't know anything about how cool Helen Keller was as an adult, but I was obsessed with her childhood. Um, I don't know how I found books. My parents were big readers, so they always had books around the house, but I—I don't know. We went to the chain bookstore near—next to the grocery store, and I would always get a *Baby-Sitters Club* book and then read half of it on the five-minute drive home. My mom got really mad at me for that all the time. I don't know. Books were just kind of always there. They're a big part of my family's culture, so they were a big part of my life from like, the day I was born, I think. We just stayed that way.

Tennenbaum: Did you ever discuss the books with your parents?

Lukoff: Probably? I don't have a great memory of my childhood, probably because I was just really sad during it—not because of like, trauma or anything. I was just a really sad little kid. I don't know why. Um, we probably talked—oh, I remember one time, Dad was trying to figure out what we should make for Thanksgiving, and I remembered a specific recipe in one of the *Baby-Sitters Club* books—one of like, the hundred that I had—and I ran to my room. I grabbed it, and I opened it like, right to the middle, right to the recipe, and I was like, "Let's have that for dinner, or for Thanksgiving." He was very impressed that I could just like, find it right away. Um, did we talk about the books I read? I don't know. I don't know what else we would've talked about, but also like, you know, the adventures of Claudia, Kristy, and Mary Anne don't really make for gripping conversation, so I have no idea. I do remember—ugh, god—I read this one *Goosebumps* book where—it's the one where they turn into dogs [*My Hairiest Adventure*] and one of the kids, um—the main character keeps like, growing hair everywhere, and it turns out that he was injected with a serum, S-E-R-U-M, from this like, mad scientist. And I asked my mom what "serum" was, but she thought I said "semen," and so she explained, and I was very, very confused for a very long time. I was like, "Why are they giving him that? That's terrible!" [laughter] That didn't clear up for a really long time for me. That was great. I have that book in my library now, um, just because why not? Doesn't say anything inappropriate. I just had no idea—like, I must've just mispronounced it. I don't know.

Tennenbaum: Okay. So then you said, after—in middle school, it sounds like you quickly moved on to adult books?

Lukoff: Yeah, that's probably true. Yeah.

Tennenbaum: Do you remember any notable books from that time, anything that really resonated with you that you read?

Lukoff: I just remember reading *Autobiography of a Face* over and over and over and over again. Um, I'm sure if I thought harder I could remember other books that I read in middle school. Um, but for some reason, that one really, really sticks with me. Um, it's about this—it's written by a woman named Lucy Grealy, who was a well-known poet from—who—I think she was a professor at Sarah Lawrence [College], maybe? Or maybe she just went to like, grad school there. Um, but she had a specific kind of cancer when she was young, and went through a lot of treatment for it—she—first she was treated for cancer, and then for the rest of her life she was treated for, um, the disfigurement of her face that came from the treatment. And I don't know why, but I just read that book dozens of times. Um, I don't know why. A lot of it was about her experience of like, being in pain and being sick—um, being a child who couldn't relate to other children, um, which probably appealed to me even though I was like, healthy and stuff. Um, it was also just—as I recall, it was really beautifully written. Um, also I just kept forgetting to take it out of my backpack, so I just kept reading it. I don't know what else I read in middle school. I know that I still read tons of *Baby-Sitters Club* books. Um, I read some weird book—I don't remember what it was called. It was—I got it from my school library. It was about some girl who turned into—she was like—she became like, a supermodel even though she wasn't that pretty. I don't know. I remember one scene where she got like, groped by some guy, and that's like, the main part that I remember from that book, because like, I was in seventh or eighth grade and that was like, really risqué. I remember carrying around *Watership Down* for days on end, because it was the biggest book in the library, and it made me look cool. Well, I thought it made me look cool. It definitely did not, but that was my logic at the time. Um, I just kind of read a lot of random stuff—like, whatever I could get at the library, whatever I picked up at the bookstore, just lots of random books, some of which resonated for reasons that I have no idea why, others that I'm sure I've forgotten. A lot of Lynne Reid Banks—um, like I read one book about this girl who lived on the kibbutz. I read *The Indian in the Cupboard*, which I feel bad about now, but I was, you know, eight years old. I don't—I don't know. Um—I know I was just always reading, so it's kind of hard for me to remember which book out of the endless stream—which is true now. Like, if someone asks me what I've read lately that's good, I can't tell you, because I've read ten books in the past two weeks, but I can't immediately pull one of them out of the line-up in my head.

Tennenbaum: So what kinds of books have you been reading, like, nowadays?

Lukoff: I just said that I can't answer that!

Tennenbaum: [laughter] Well, like a type, genre?

Lukoff: No, it's fine. Okay. So, I read a lot of young adult still, partially because I hear a lot of chatter about different books on Twitter, either because they're really good or because they're really bad, and I'm curious about both ends of the spectrum. Um, I had to read every gay young adult novel for the past two years, because I was on Stonewall [Book Awards], which means that now I don't want to read any gay young adult novels because I'm super sick of them, but I'm sure I'll get back to it once I've had some time away. Um, right now I'm in the middle of a collection of short stories by Margaret Atwood, which I really like. Um, but my main reading practice is either—uh, so I only get books from the library—the public library—and I will either read books

that I hear about that I want to read immediately because they seem important, or just amazing, or they're the newest book by my favorite author, or they seem like immediately relevant, or I just go to a bookstore, whatever, and I see books that look good, I write them down, and then a year later—I put them into my list of books that I want to read, which is very, very, very long. So a new book that I add to my list might not get read for another year, which I feel fine about. It means I'll never run out of books to read, and that's great. Like, I just read one called *Calvin* by Martine Leavitt—oh, it's in my backpack. Let me grab it. I think it just came out a couple years ago, but it's been at the top of my list. And by the top of the list, I mean the oldest book on the list for a long time, and I finally got to it. I try to be fair in the order that I read books, but not always.

Tennenbaum: What does fairness mean in the order of what you read?

Lukoff: Uh, "fair" means that I don't want to just skip to the end of the list and only read books that I just found out about. If a book sounded good a year ago, then I still want to read it even though it's not new. Because I also know that like, it can be hard to—it's hard for backlists to find love. Like, if a book isn't brand new or a bestseller, then it can just kind of slip away from people's like, radar, and I like to—I like to show love for books that were like—that got attention three years ago but have been completely forgotten about since then. That just seems really sad to me. So, I often recommend books like that, too.

Tennenbaum: So, we'll definitely get around to um, your role on the Stonewall Book Commission later. Um, and so you said you hear about books on Twitter and find out about new stuff. Um, what kinds of—like, who are you following on Twitter where you get these recommendations? Are they friends? Does it feel like a community on Twitter, of readers?

Lukoff: No. I don't—I don't do Twitter very well. I don't do it very much, and I don't follow very many people, um, but I do follow enough people involved in like, activism and social justice in children's literature that I kind of get the periphery of whatever latest issue is going on. Um, and—yeah, it doesn't feel like a community to me. I definitely know of people who don't know me, which is fine. Um, I could probably be more active, but I'm also scared to, because it's so public. I don't want to draw like, a horde of angry trolls yelling at me for something—I don't know—either something that like, I deserve, or something that's—that is like, just because I'm trans or whatever. I don't know. Um, yeah. I don't know. I don't know, but I'm not much on Twitter, so I just kind of get the periphery of what people are talking about, which is still a lot.

Tennenbaum: Hmm. Are there other ways in which you interact with the activist and social justice side of YA and children's lit?

Lukoff: Right now, mostly in terms of the books that I write and the materials that I get for my library and promote, and also how I get them. Um, I don't talk much. Like, I don't—I don't like to put myself into discussions or debates, partially because it often takes me a really long time to really synthesize my stance on something and why I've arrived at that, because I really want to examine like, all of my biases, all of my baggage, what everyone else is saying, that new thing

that just changed my mind, and that's not how Twitter works. Like—and that's also not how the current like, thinkpiece industry works. Like, you need to have a very hot, very immediate take like that [snaps fingers]—um, that you put out there, and I hate—I hate that because I can't—I can't know that my opinion about something is solid unless I've spent a really long time like, investigating it, and writing a 1500 piece—article about something that I just found out about isn't—doesn't feel intellectually sound to me. Um, and that's part of why I don't get involved in these discussions, because it takes me a really long time to think through like, what everyone is saying and like, everything that I think and everything that I have known and all of my like, biases and prejudices and that. Um, but I am careful about what books that I buy for my library, what books I recommend to kids and how I do that, the books that I write, and who I choose—and who I want to publish with, and also just like, conversations that I have not on the internet with people—um, with like friends or—like, friends of mine who are in publishing, friends of mine who are authors. Um, I would rather have like, a long and messy conversation with one person than tweet at a total stranger because I think they're wrong—or right, even. Which isn't to say that that's wrong. Like, I learn a lot from hot takes and from people yelling at each other online. Like, it is a tremendously valuable way of—it's a tremendously valuable form of public discourse. It's just not one that I can engage in because of—I don't know, either anxiety or uncertainty or—yeah, a lot.

Tennenbaum: You also mentioned the anxiety and like, worry about trolls coming after you—

Lukoff: Oh, yeah.

Tennenbaum: —for whatever reason.

Lukoff: I've only—I've only gotten one total random comment from some like, TERF [Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminist] troll, but I didn't like it. I don't want to get more.

Tennenbaum: Do you feel like, um, being trans, you have more of a spotlight on whatever words or whatever political message or stance you're taking on social media?

Lukoff: I wouldn't—I wouldn't say more, but I would say that it attracts different attention. Like, I'm not going to get—I am not going to be attacked by like, people who are racist—like, in that way like, white privilege means that I can say things—like, I don't anyway, but like, I know that I'm not going to be the recipient of like, racialized or racist hate. Um, on the flip side, I know that there is like, trolls who set up searches for certain words and then will go after someone who uses them, so if I were to refer to like, something trans-specific, then I know that I'm potentially opening myself up to a lot of like, transphobic hatred, which is also scary. Also like, I'm nervous about anti-semitism online, because that's a thing. Um, and I know that—I know that there are people whose like, daily lives are formed by like, the number of death threats they got that day, and that sounds terrible, and I would rather avoid that. And I also wish that I wasn't so like, timid, but I'm sure I won't have a choice eventually—like, once my books get published, like, I'm sure I'll get more attention that I won't like, so I'll get used to it eventually, I'm sure. Yay.

Tennenbaum: So, I'll also come back to the books that you've written.

Lukoff: Yeah!

Tennenbaum: Then, hopping back on um, the chronology timeline.

Lukoff: Yes, sorry. Chronology.

Tennenbaum: Um, so then is there anything from like, high school years, um, and after middle school, or even moving into college, um, that feels relevant to your development in terms of like, how you view literature? Were you writing at that time? Um, were you still reading pretty vigorously?

Lukoff: Um, I was always reading—always, always, always reading. Um, I started to figure out that I was queer when I was like, fifteen or sixteen, and I started going to my school library to look for books, and I went to the right Dewey Decimal section, and my school library had like, half a dozen books, and they were all those like, prefabricated issue books that publishers put out that are like, “Gay Marriage: Pro or Con?” you know, where it's like different articles from “both sides” quote-unquote of an issue. Um, and they were all really repetitive and not very interesting, but I still like, devoured them. Um, also, when I was sixteen I got hired at Barnes & Noble, which was great. I liked working way more than I liked school. Um, I was around books all day, and I got to talk about books, and no one made fun of me for knowing a lot about books, because it was, you know, valuable. I mean, I was kind of a shit about it. Like, if I was at the—so if, like, there were two of us at the information desk and a customer was asking my coworker for help, and they were like, trying to find the book on the computer, if I knew what the book was, I would just go and get it and bring it back, which was really annoying, but I was sixteen and I didn't know how annoying I was being. I thought I was being helpful, but instead it was really, really annoying and rude. Which—I was being annoying and rude, I just didn't realize it at the time. Um, but getting hired at Barnes & Noble was huge. I mean it—if it weren't for that, I don't know if I would be a librarian today. Um, so I'm really grateful that my mom made me take that job when I wanted to keep working at the local, uh, taco chain, called Taco Time. I worked there for a day, and then Barnes & Noble was like, “Hey, we're going to hire you,” and I was like, “Nah, I don't want to. I'm fine. I'll just stay here,” and my mom was like, “You certainly will not. You are going to quit your job frying ‘burritos’”—I'm putting “burritos” in air quotes because they weren't really burritos—“and you're going to work at Barnes & Noble, and that's it.” And it's like, one of the only times I can remember her forcing me to do something or like, deciding for me something like that, but I'm glad she did. It was the right choice. I don't know. Uh, my mom got into a car accident when I was fifteen, and my dad was traveling for work and my brother was at college, so I spent more time than I might have otherwise at home—like, not necessarily taking care of her, but like, she couldn't really drive me places, and I didn't have my license at that point, and yeah. I don't remember a lot of those years because they were—that—I would say that that was fairly traumatizing, because my mom was in like, constant agony, and I had to take care of her and like, my dad was gone and my brother was gone. Um, so I just kind of dissociated as much as I could during high school, um, which is probably part of why I liked having a job so much, because

it got me out of the house. Um, and I didn't really have a lot of friends, um, and also I—you know, read endlessly, of course, because that's all I would do no matter what anyway. Yeah, I don't know.

Tennenbaum: When you got into Barnes & Noble did you have more access, or did you seek out more queer literature?

Lukoff: Not—oh, I don't know. I don't think I did. Um, I was really scared. There was—there was the one bay of like—a full bookshelf, top to bottom, is called a bay—there was one bay of like, gay/lesbian—the gay and lesbian section—which was right across from the Christian/inspiration section, and I would like, really conspicuously not look at that section and really conspicuously not look at whoever was looking at that section. Um, but I definitely read all—like, I read a lot of gay subtext into things like Batman, so I would read tons of Batman instead of reading actually gay books, because subtext is great. I love subtext. Yeah, I don't—I didn't really seek out much queer literature that I can remember, but I was still pretty new, um, and didn't—like I was like, new and scared, and didn't really know how to—I didn't even know how to start thinking about who I was, um, and in order to seek out literature I had to at least know to start thinking. Like, the library books were safe, because they were really like, boring and factual and like, point-counterpoint. It was a lot scarier to stand like, in public in front of like, the gay and lesbian section at the bookstore that I worked at, and like, be seen looking at books that were like, by queers and for queers. I did find a book in my bookstore called, uh, *A Parent's Guide to Preventing Homosexuality*, and I hid that one. I like, sort of like stuffed it behind a bookshelf, because I didn't want anyone to get it. There were like, a few books like that in the Barnes & Noble that I worked for, and it always made me really upset.

Tennenbaum: And so, moving past high school, um—college, yes.

Lukoff: College was great. I loved college. Um, so I knew that I wanted to live in New York City because—so, my family is a bunch of Chicago Jews, and we moved to north of Seattle, where there were no Jews, so we were always very like, culturally, um, like, outside of everything around us. Like, where I was growing up, nobody knew—no one had ever met a Jew before. Like, we were the only Jews that anyone ever knew, and there was a lot of like, kind of crypto-antisemitism just kind of floating around, but people didn't even necessarily know it was anti-semitism. It's just like, you know, “Don't Jew me down on that,” like, and, “You're such a fucking Jew,” like that sort of thing was just everywhere. Um, it was really scary. I think I've been shaped more by direct anti-semitism than by homophobia or transphobia, because I had experienced anti-semitism since like, kindergarten—like, explicitly directed anti-semitism. And also like, my parents were like, city people in the suburbs and like, we looked different from all of our Nordic neighbors. Um, and so I visited New York City for the first time when I was like, fifteen or so, and I just immediately felt like, “This is it. This is where I belong. These are my people. Everyone looks like me. Everyone's grumpy like me. Um, people know what a bagel is. There's like, a synagogue on every corner.” Like, it felt like home and from like, the first second I got to New York City, I knew that I had to live here. Um, so when it came time to apply to colleges, I only wanted to apply to New York City-area colleges. Um, and then I ended up applying early decision to Barnard



[College], because I knew I had a better chance of getting in, and I liked Barnard because it was in Manhattan as opposed to like, Sarah Lawrence [College], but it had its own kind of separate campus, unlike NYU [New York University]. Um, and I'd just discovered feminism and was very excited about it, so I liked the idea of going to a women's college, because I had no idea that I was trans. So yeah, I applied early decision and got in, and that was one of the like, happiest days of my life, I think. It was great. I was like, "I'm going to be around other smart people, and I'm going to be around other gay people! There's going to be Jews, and I'm going to have bagels and egg creams and black-and-whites!" and it—like, realizing that I wanted to live in New York City felt very parallel to when I realized I was trans. Sort of like, "Oh, this is where I'm supposed to be. This makes sense for who I am." Um, so yeah. Moved to New York, took a lot of English and History classes. I worked in the Barnard library for a couple years, just at the circulation desk—um, so I don't really count that as a library job, because I didn't need any specific skills, but it was still fun and around books, and I still liked books. My freshman year roommate says that I'm the only person she knows who read for pleasure in college. Like, we had all that reading. I would still read books for fun, because I don't know how not to. Like, I don't actually—I know that there are people who don't read, and that's fine. Like, I don't—I don't think that reading is a moral value, it's just the only thing that I like to do, but also I can't imagine what people do if they don't read. Like, I—I just—I don't know how you move through a day if you don't always have a book. And I know that there's people who are very happy that way, and I just don't understand it, but it's also fine. A lot of my loved ones don't read, and they are as smart or smarter than I am, and that's fine. I just really like books.

Tennenbaum: In college, did you find—um, what was your social scene like—the people you were around?

Lukoff: I don't know. Mostly queer people. Um, I was also in this really nerdy literary society called "Philo"—The Philolexian Society—which I'll actually come back to when we get onto the books that I've written. Uh, my like, junior year—sophomore, junior year—I made friends with some trans guys who didn't go to Barnard, so I started socializing sort of like, outside of the campus scene. Um, I don't know. It's all—oh, I did become friends with this group of girls who were like, a year ahead of me, which felt so old at the time. They were sophomores when I was a freshman. They were so mature. Um, I'm still friendly with them now, but we're not like, close. But we lived together my sophomore year. So much of college is just like, hanging out, you know? Like, you're on campus, you stop by someone's room, you eat with them at the dining hall—like, it's sort of a made—like, a one-size-fits-all social scene. At least, for me it felt that way, even though I didn't really get too close to anyone, because I've never been very good at getting close to people like that. Um, it was still really fun. Like, I felt like I had community for the first time. And I also was really involved with campus activism—like, reproductive rights stuff, queer stuff. I was super busy, which in retrospect, I realize was a way of pretending like I wasn't like, depressed and crazy and trans, but it worked. I had a lot of fun. But later, it all came crashing down, but it was a good four years while it lasted.

Tennenbaum: Do you remember any specific actions you took?

Lukoff: Um, I was an abortion clinic escort. So, we would go down super early in the morning and wear like, these little vests that said like, “Escort” or something, and there were like, protesters who would harass people like, walking to the clinic, and so we would like, walk next to them and be like, “Hey, I’m really sorry. These people are super rude. If you’re looking for the clinic, it’s right up there. Like, don’t worry about them.” Like, we just wanted to make people feel like they weren’t alone—or like, they weren’t, you know, just left to be yelled at by random like, people telling them that they were like, murdering their baby or something. Um, that was great. I loved doing that. I once did an activism project where we printed out little cards—not cards, like little slips of paper—about like, this one specific clothing chain that had like, bad employment practices and—I don’t know. I really cared about retail clothing at the time, and like, fatphobia and stuff, in a way that I still care about, but I don’t buy new clothes, so I don’t know. Um, and we like, put them in the pockets of like, jeans at the store, and that was really great. I’m not going to say anything—I don’t know, it’s probably illegal. I’m not sure. Um, that was a long time ago, so whatever statutes of limitations are probably over. Um, I organized a lot of events—like, speakers and panels and stuff, which—my adult self is kind of embarrassed by some of the stuff that I did, because I know better now politically, but I was also learning and—yeah. We all—we all learn as we get older. Yeah, just a lot of like, campus organizing, mostly.

Tennenbaum: Are there any specific, um, I guess political lessons that you learned through Barnard, through having a queer friend group, that you still hold today?

Lukoff: The main—the main thing that I learned was from this, uh, queer-ish message board called StrapOn.org. Have you heard about StrapOn?

Tennenbaum: No, I haven’t.

Lukoff: Okay. Um, queers of a certain age will be like, “Oh, StrapOn, yeah, yeah, yeah.” It was notorious for being like, really mean but also really smart, I think. I’m—I didn’t post that much. People didn’t really know who I was, but I would post sometimes. And StrapOn did a really great job of just teaching me how to be a person on the internet—like, how to not insert myself in discussions where I wasn’t necessary, how to actually shut the fuck up and listen to what people are saying instead of like, trying to beat them in a conversation. Like, one—I think the one post that taught me more than like, college, was—it was in the closed—there were like, groups. There were like, sections of the board that were restricted to like, either people of color, or fat people, or sex workers, or trans people, or whatever, and you could only post in them if you were, you know, of that identity group. And in—and you could read if you weren’t, but you weren’t allowed to talk. Um, and I think it was in the fat group, where the title of the post was like, “Ten Steps for”—like, it was like, ten steps for like, being a good fat ally or something, and every—all ten steps were “shut the fuck up and listen to what the fat person is telling you.” Um, and obviously that’s easily translatable to literally any other like, marginalized identity. Like, just shut up and listen. And I remember reading that. I was like, “But what if I want to—I like, should just shut up,” and for some reason just seeing it repeated like that at the tender age of nineteen or twenty, like, really imprinted itself on me, and is a lot of how I conduct myself today. Like, I’m talking a lot now, because like, you asked me to, I don’t know, but in general I tend to listen a lot more

than talk, and that was really valuable. Yeah, StrapOn taught me a lot about just like, how—how to actually like, take in what people are saying and like, not get defensive and not think that it's about me—even if it is about me, just to be like, “Oh yeah, I did fuck up. Okay. Let me think about the ways that I was wrong, and the ways that I can not do this again in the future.” So that was—that was way—I learned more from—in terms of like, being a like, ethical human who engages with other humans, I feel like I learned more from that part of the internet than I did from college. College taught me how to like, write essays and stuff. I don't know. I'm sure that I owe my education more than I'm giving it credit for, but a lot of it I don't really remember as clearly. I'm not sure why.

Tennenbaum: Would you like to get into at all—you said after those four years, um, the keeping busy with activism and everything—

Lukoff: [laughter] Yeah!

Tennenbaum: —came crashing down.

Lukoff: Oh man. Sure. It actually like, started to come crashing down my senior year, probably because I was like, scared about leaving and starting the rest of my life. Also—so, in the summer of two thousand and—hang on—two, three—I think it was the summer of 2004—does that make sense? Probably—was when I realized that I was trans, and I didn't want to be. Like, I—should I just get into that part? Because that was like—it was like a light switch for me.

Tennenbaum: If you want to talk about it.

Lukoff: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Um, so I met someone on Friendster—because it was the early 2000's—and we were both interested in like, sla—like, fanfiction—and I'd only recently discovered that I loved fanfiction, because—I had said earlier that I loved like, subtext in Batman comics, and I realized that fanfiction was taking subtext and making it text, and that made me really happy. And I ended up getting coffee with this guy at the Tea Lounge in Park Slope, which isn't there any longer, and he was trans, and I thought he was really cute—and until then, I thought I was a lesbian, so I was very confused, which is so cliché now, but I didn't know that at the time. So, he was telling me about how he figured out he was trans because he realized that he wanted—that he could be a gay man, that he didn't have to be like, a straight dudebro, that he could be like, a pretty boy who wore like, tight shirts and did his hair all nice, and like, slept with men—and that's—that like, exact moment, I was like, “Oh, that's what I am. Fuck.” Like, I really didn't want to be trans, because it just seemed like such a thing. I'd have to go to the doctor, I'd have to tell my parents, and I'd have to do all this stuff, and I just didn't want to. It seemed like, so hard. So I spent the next like, year convincing myself that I was making it up. I just went through really like, complicated thought processes about how like, “I'm not really trans. I just really *want* to be. You know, some people are actually transgender. I just desperately want to be a boy, but I'm not actually a boy,” which I've heard from other people is—like, they have the same process, too. Like, “I don't—I'm not really trans, I just desperately want to be.” So I fought with myself for like, a year, uh, and like, nine months after that like, light switch, I started asking people to call me

Kyle. And I picked the name Kyle because it was really common in my high school, and all the Kyles that I knew in my high school were like, very tall and blond and like, Aryan and muscular. And I was like, "I'm none of these things. That's so funny." And I think part of me was like, if I picked a name that didn't feel like mine at all, it would convince me that I wasn't actually a guy. Like, it was a way of like, tricking myself into not being trans, but it didn't work. Um, also, I figured I would change my name to something else if I really transitioned, but by the time I—I had wanted to ask my parents what they would rename me, and by the time I was changing my name legally they didn't want to. They were like, "No, like, this is your decision. We don't want any part of it." Um, so I was like, "Well, I've been Kyle for like, a few years now. I might as well stick with it." And now I guess it works. I tell kids that I'm just "Smile," which is cute, um, and that works for me, but if I had known that I would be Kyle for the rest of my life, I probably would've picked a diff—I would've definitely picked a different name, and that's fine. Most people don't pick their names, so... So I started asking people to call me Kyle, and I started asking people to use male pronouns for me, but I was still at Barnard, and part of like, all of my reading on StrapOn was saying that like, "Hey, it's not actually okay for men to take resources from women, and it's not okay for men to force women to make room for them in that way. Like, that's patriarchy." And I was like, "Oh, yeah, I shouldn't do that. I should just"—I—like, I didn't—I wasn't going to like, pretend that I wasn't trans, and I wanted people to treat me with respect, but I didn't want to force a women's institution to change its policy to accommodate me, because that felt like, misogynist. And it still—that's still where I stand. Like, you shouldn't have—like, you know, if you come out halfway through or whatever, that's fine. Like, I don't think that trans men should be kicked out, but I think that part of being like, a decent—like, a good man and not like, misogynist, is to not like, force institutions and resources dedicated to women to like—to like accom—to like, provide special accommodations in that way, you know? Which I know isn't the most popular, but I would rather be a feminist than—like, I would rather have that be my feminist practice than make women like, accommodate me. Does that make sense? I don't know.

Tennenbaum: So at that time, how was it navigating Barnard, and coming out?

Lukoff: I mean I was pretty—I was like, well-known and relatively well-liked, so it was fine. Um, I was treated with respect, um, as far as I recall. Like, people were nice to me. It was also like, in 2005-2006, so there was like, this flourishing of like—I'm sure it was going on from before then, but I didn't know about it—there was this like, weird fetishization of trans men, um, that I definitely benefited from. So that's kind of gross, but also real. There was another thing—oh, what was that? No, that's about it. Oh, and then also—okay, so my senior year, I—people were mostly calling me Kyle, and like he and him, um, I wasn't transitioning yet. I was like, wearing a binder every day, um, and dressing pretty much exactly the same as I've always dressed, which is kind of just like, boring jeans and t-shirts. Um, and by like the middle to the end of my senior year, I was having like, nightly panic attacks where I was just like, freaking out, but I didn't know what panic attacks were, and I didn't really have the language to describe them. I just knew that like, several times a week I would be sobbing on the floor of my dorm room, and I couldn't breathe, and I was like, "This is probably fine. This is normal. Everyone does this. I'm totally fine." And I would mention it to a couple friends, and they were like, "Hey, maybe you should go see a therapist," and I was like, "No, I'm fine. Like, I'm super okay," you know? I did go to see a campus

therapist once, and she—oh god, I don't even remember—she like, asked me how I was doing, and I think I started to cry, and I said I was fine, and I think I cried for the rest of the 45 minutes. And it was like, "I'm fine now. I went to therapy. I'm all better. It was great." That was not the best time of my life. Not the worst—that was coming later. I mean, *baruch Hashem*, it might get worse from here on. I don't know. But, uh—oh, so that—so, the end of my senior year, I was slowly losing it, but I didn't realize that at the time. Um, and then—so when it really started to get fucked up was in January of 2007, so I'd been out of college for about six months. I started testosterone. I never told my parents I was trans, I just slowly told them each step of the way like, "People are calling me Kyle now. People are calling me he and him now. I'm starting hormones," but I was never like, "So, I'm transgender." Like, I just kind of did it. Um, they weren't great for a while, but they're fine now. I feel like there are so many different layers, and I can't possibly talk about everything, and that's okay. Um, so I started T and it exac—it started to exacerbate an eating disorder that I had had for pretty much my entire life, but never really—like, I was always kind of like, semi-anorexic. Like, I counted calories and I met a lot of the clinical definitions for anorexia but not enough of them, and I was never like—as far as I know, I was never like, in any physical danger. Um, but I had like, severe body dysmorphia, and like, really fairly crippling attitudes towards food, and my like, caloric intake, and like, exercise. And that's been around for—like, some of my earliest memories are about that, um, so that's always been like, a thread running through like, my entire childhood and adolescence and up until now, really. Um, but when I started testosterone, it really fucked with me, because it ups your metabolism, so I was having to eat a lot more just to like, kind of stay at the same level, and that freaked me out. Also, I was like, newly out of college and like, newly transitioning, and I started—I like, got into a relationship with this guy that wasn't very good. And then I decided to apply to law school, so I got into law school in Boston. So like, every—like, there were so many major things in my life that were like, either in flux or that I wasn't sure about, that I like, started—like, it just started to feel okay to be hungry. Like, I started to intentionally cultivate a feeling of like, hunger and like, not eating. And then I was like, "But I'm fine. I'm still going to go to law school, and I'll get better somehow," and I super didn't. Um, and like, by the time I got to Boston, I was like, actively anorexic and my health was in significant danger. I was eating, you know, a dangerously low amount of calories every day intentionally, and if I ate more than a dangerously low amount, I would purge. Um—and I mean, I think all of that was like—I was just like, really fucked up, and I wanted to stop being fucked up, and I figured that the only way that I deserved help is if I was like, actually sick. So I decided to make myself actually sick, so that I could get help. So, I actually had a wonderful doctor at—I went to Northeastern [University] for like a month for law school, and I had a wonderful doctor on campus, who like—just like, they immediately got that I was trans and anorexic, and that that wasn't a *thing*. Like, they just—it was like, probably the most affirming health experience I've ever had, was at that law school, and it was just really lovely. They got me on antidepressants, which was great, um, and the doctor was really straightforward with me. Like, at one point she like, took my labs and like—so she like, asked me what I was eating—what I'd eaten that day—she like, did blood work, that sort of thing, and at one point I remember she called me and she said, "So, your labs indicate that you're at risk for sudden cardiac death. You need help." And I was like, "That sounds bad. I don't—sudden cardiac death doesn't sound great. I don't know." Um, like to me, that just sounds like a bad—but you know, like, I was—but like, I also didn't really believe it. I was like, "I'm actually fine, though. Like, I'm

not actually going to die. Um, it's just my doctor says that I'm going to die, but I'm fine." Um, it was also really hard to find—to find help, because at that point, I was still legally female—like, I hadn't changed any of my documents or my name—but I was on testosterone, and I passed as male most of the time. And I'd get health insurance, but like—I called this one like, inter—like, national eating disorder service that has like, clinics all over the country, and I explained to them, like, my deal, and she called me back the next day, and she was like, "Well, you know, your insurance is really great, but unfortunately, all of our services are for women," and I was like, "I'm still legally a woman." She was like, "Yeah, but like, it still wouldn't work," and I was like, "Cool, thanks." Um, and then I went to see a psychiatrist, who told me, "You know, you're not eating enough," and I was like, "I know that! That's why I'm here, buddy. That's what this means. Like, you're a specialist. Do I need to explain to you what this is?" Um, and so he kept suggesting places, and he was like, "Oh, well, no, but that place only takes women, and that place doesn't take men. That place takes men, but it's in Oklahoma," and I was like, "I want to go to Oklahoma." Like, one—um, one therapist said that she wanted to get me to love myself, and I was like, "Can we focus on me like, not dying first, and then we could get to the self-love part? Thanks." So, I finally found a place in—outside of Boston that would take me, that like, accepted men. Oh, no, but before that, actually, I went to an outpatient program specifically for queer people with like, mental health issues. It was mostly people who were either like, suicidal or with like, addiction or whatever. Um—

Tennenbaum: Do you remember what it was called?

Lukoff: I don't. I could show you where it is on a map-ish, but I don't remember what it was called. I'm sure I could find it if I like, did some research, but I don't remember. I want to say it was like, Rainbow House or something. It was attached to a hospital, um, so it was like, a satellite program of the hospital next door, and it was all just like, group therapy, basically. And at one point, this like—one of the like, nurses weighed me, and she said, you know—she like, had me take off my shoes, but I was still wearing like, my clothes—and she said, "You know, if you were in the eating disorder ward next door, I would make you wear a hospital gown for this." And I was like, "Wait, there's an eating disorder ward next door? Can I go there? Like, why am—why am I not in that program instead?" and she was like, "Well, it's really just for women. Like, you wouldn't feel comfortable there." I was like, [whispering] "I'm literally starving to death! Like, come on!" Um, and also—so we—so, the whole like, group would walk over to the hospital next door to get lunch in the cafeteria, and my lunch would be, you know, three slices of cucumber and a carrot stick—you know, something like that. Um, and then I had like, a meeting with one of the directors of the program, and he said like, "What did you eat for lunch today?" and I said, "I had three slices of cucumber and a carrot stick," or, you know, whatever like, ridiculously small amount of food I had eaten, and he was like, "Uh-huh. Good, good. That's a good start," and I was like, "That is not a good start! Like, I'm starving myself to death in front of you. Like, what are you doing?" Um, and the other pers—it was either him or the other person involved in the program—was like, you know, "Kyle, our job isn't to make you eat. Our job is to get yourself—our job is to get you to a place where you want to eat." And I was like, "I'm literally starving myself right now. Like, you're not going to get me to want to eat by just like, talking to me. Like, you actually need to give me consequences," and they were like, "Well, we're just not set up for that." Like, "There's a fucking

eating disorder wing next door! Just send me there!” It was really—that wasn’t great. So finally, after like, endless phone calls and referrals, and blah blah blah, I found the hospital called—I think it was called Walden Behavioral Care, I think—in Waltham, Massachusetts. And so first, I went out there and they like, did my labs, drew my blood, and they decided that I wasn’t quite sick enough for inpatient, which I’m sure was accurate, but I did qualify for their outpatient program. Um, so every day, actually, a friend of mine—we’re still friends now—she drove me every single day to the program. She says it was on her way to work. I don’t know if I believe her, but she definitely saved my life, which I really appreciate. Um, I’ve told her this, and she said that I like, also helped her in like, her own fucked-up stuff, because she was coming off of like, her own suicide attempt, and helping me helped her help herself, which is lovely. So that program was—well, I didn’t die. That’s nice. Like, they—because they were specifically for eating disorders, they had like, you know, specific food requirements that they would kick you out if you didn’t meet, so I did that. I was very compliant. Um, but I wasn’t allowed to tell anyone that I was trans. The—one of the—I think the director of the program had like, a meeting with me in his office where he closed his door—it was like, cracked open because he wasn’t allowed to have it closed—and he said that like, they discussed my case and decided that like, I shouldn’t talk about being trans in the therapy sessions—in like, the group therapy—because it was really like, an outside issue that wasn’t related to me having an eating disorder. But it was like, “How are you a doctor? Do you know anything about how people work?” And like, also, it was all women except for me. Like, all the women in the program were talking about their husbands and their children, and things that were like, outside issues for me. Like, that’s not related to my life, but I can’t talk about the fact that I got a sex change and then stopped eating. Like, it’s got to be related. But I like, eventually ate. I like, gained enough weight to make sure that I was like, physically safer, and then they discharged me. And then I was still crazy for a while, because like, duh. Uh, but I went back to therapy and like, really really really like, slowly clawed my way back towards like, some semblance of like, health. And it took a really long time, but I would say that I am there now, which is great. It was—I mean, this was in November—is that true?—in November of this year, I will have—it will be ten years since I was discharged from the program, so. I’m still like—I still say that I’m in recovery, because I know that that’s never something that I won’t have. Like, I will always have—I will always have anorexic impulses and leanings, um, but I don’t think that there’s much that could make me relapse. Like, I’m pretty fine, which is great.

Tennenbaum: Congratulations.

Lukoff: Thank you. Woof, that was a long time.

Tennenbaum: Were you still working through law school at that time?

Lukoff: Oh, no, no, no. I dropped out after a month. It turns out that you can’t really do your reading if you’re like, starving. I mean, I’m sure some people can. I couldn’t. Uh, I—so, I took medical leave, and I could’ve gone back the next year, but I was like, “You know, you tried to kill me once. I’m not going to give you a second chance.” And I also realized I didn’t want to be a lawyer. Like, I didn’t want to spend all of my time working. Um, I wanted to have fun and go out to bars, and like, have, you know, casual dates with people and not—because I realized that when

I was in college, I wanted to be busy all the time so that I wouldn't have to have feelings or like, think about myself, and then once I realized that I could be like, a functioning gay man in New York City, then I didn't want to work all the time. I wanted to have fun. Um, and law school isn't great if you want to have fun. So I dropped out. And then I got a job working for a buddy of mine—we're not friends anymore—but I worked for his like, dad's company, and then I hated that, so I went back to Barnes & Noble in the summer of 2008. And then I worked at Barnes & Noble until I got into library school, and then I became a librarian. So it was like, library—uh, bookstore, college library—and I still worked at Barnes & Noble during the summers and stuff—um, and then law school, that other job, bookstore, library. So I've been pretty much just working with books and people since I was 16.

Tennenbaum: And where did you get your, uh, Master's in Library Science?

Lukoff: Queens College. It was affordable, and I got through the program really quickly, which was nice.

Tennenbaum: I have, uh, one question on the um, anorexia, and so—because that was—seems like it really, really flared up, um, when you started taking T.

Lukoff: Yeah.

Tennenbaum: Um, was your body image you were after or that you desired—do you feel like that was related to gender presentation and reflection?

Lukoff: Funnily enough, if you read my article in the 2010 book *Gender Outlaws: The Next Generation*, edited by Kate Bornstein and S. Bear Bergman, you can find my essay entitled "Taking Up Space." Sorry, that's just like, an advertisement. I wrote like, a whole article about that. Like, it's all like, layered and complicated, and there's no like, one easy answer, but like—yeah, I definitely wanted to like, not have like, curves, but I also wanted to not exist in the first place, so those two things are intimately related. Um, I got much more comfortable gaining weight once I presented as male, um, probably also related to like, misogyny and ideas of like, what kinds of female bodies are acceptable in public. Um, but also, a lot of my recovery I owe to, um, like fat politics and fat activism—like, I started—like, so, the friend who drove me to and from the hospital every day is fat, and she—like, one of her—she's like, really involved in fat politics, and fat community, and fat activism, and I didn't really know that was a thing until I met her. Um, and just hearing her talk about like, fat stuff like, made me real—introduced me to the concept of that—introduced me to that concept, basically. And so once I like, moved back to New York City from Boston, I started like, reading lots of blogs by like, fat bloggers, and reading about, um, like, fatphobia and like—not body positivity but specifically like, fatphobia and fat activism, um, and fat liberation—and that actually helped me a lot. And again, like, I didn't talk too much, because I wasn't fat, and I didn't want to like, say, "Hey, look at me! Pay attention to me!" but I also like, didn't want to—but I also learned a lot, and like, gained a lot of valuable tools for thinking about my own body. Um, hopefully not by taking re—I mean, I can't—I didn't take those resources from them, they're just on the internet. I just read them, too. Um, so, yeah. I would



say a combination of like, transitioning, not hating myself and not wanting to die, and also discovering like, fat liberation is what helped me like, figure out how to have a body, which, I mean, we're all still figuring out. I'm still figuring it out.

Tennenbaum: Um, so then—

Lukoff: I almost feel like this should have like, a trigger warning at the start for like, “I’m going to talk about being anorexic,” but I don’t know how you do that. That’s your—that’s your purview.

Tennenbaum: We try to tag and add summaries.

Lukoff: That’s good. Okay, good. I don’t want anyone to be like, “Oh shit. I didn’t realize it was going to go there.” Because like, that’s such a distinct chapter in my life that I can just easily not talk about, but it’s also like—it was also like, pretty formative and also a long time ago.

Tennenbaum: Thank you for sharing it.

Lukoff: You’re welcome.

Tennenbaum: Okay. So then, um—then you got your Master’s in Library Science. Uh, where did you go from there?

Lukoff: Um, okay. So, I was about halfway through the program, and I figured that I would just get a job in some like, small town library somewhere in the middle of like, the Midwest, or the Northeast, or the Pacific Northwest—um, because I didn’t want to work for New York, Queens, or Brooklyn Public—like, I didn’t want to be a small cog in a big library machine. Um, so I was like, all gearing up for that. And then a friend of mine—we were friends before the program, and then we became better friends in the program—told me that she had—she had a part-time assistant gig at this private school library in Brooklyn, and that if I wanted it, she could send my resume to the librarian there. So she did, and I interviewed in like, the Spring, and I didn’t get that job, mostly because my schedule didn’t meet—didn’t match what they needed in terms of coverage, but then like, six months later I got an email from the librarian at this uh, very fancy private girls’ school on the Upper East Side, saying, “Dear Mr. Lukoff, we got your resume from that other librarian. We have a—we have a temporary like, medical leave position open. Would you like to interview for it?” and I was like, “Yes! I would like to interview for it. Thank you very much.” And I never thought—I knew that being a school librarian was a job, like kind of on an intellectual level—but I assumed that those were all jobs taken by like, stereotypical librarians, and that I would never have a chance at it. Like, why would anyone hire me? I’m like, 28 and a gay transsexual. Like, I can’t have that kind of job. Um, but then they hired me, and in those six weeks I learned like, how—you know, like, the cataloguing system and how you order books, and like, how you process materials and that sort of thing. And then from there, I got a similar job at a different high school—um, also on the Upper East Side—because the librarian there was having a baby, so I filled in there for six weeks. And then while I was there, I found out about the job at my current school, um, and I applied, and I got that job.

Tennenbaum: And where is that current job?

Lukoff: Uh, it's—should I say the name of the school? I don't know if I should. I'm not going to say the name of the school.

Tennenbaum: Okay.

Lukoff: I just don't—for some reason, I feel weird about that.

Tennenbaum: Is it public or private?

Lukoff: Is it—I know, I'll give you the de—it's a private school in Chelsea. Like, I don't mind if people find out on their own, I just don't want to like, say the name. That just feels—I feel like I should check in with my head of school before doing that, so I'll just say that it's a private school in Chelsea.

Tennenbaum: And if you do want to add the name later, you can let me know and I can tag it with it.

Lukoff: Okay, cool.

Tennenbaum: And um—so, how's that been? Do you...?

Lukoff: It's great. I love it. Um, I just help little kids find books all day, and I read picture books to little kids, and I can do whatever I want because I'm the only librarian, um, and people don't really know what my job is, so I can do whatever I want and say that I'm doing my job. And I do—like, I know what my job is, and I am good at it. It's just nice to not have a lot of oversight. Um, I feel like I have a lot of flexibility in terms of what lessons I can do with the kids, what conversations we can have, what materials—like, I don't have to run my selection past anybody. If I want a book, I can just get it. I don't have to ask permission. Like, I know that some librarians—like, some of my friends have—work with other librarians who are more conservative than they are, so like, they either can't get certain books, or they have to put books in like, restricted sections. Um, I only ever had one book challenged by one person, um, and that was a mess, because basically, she didn't want her child—I think her kid was a second grader—she didn't want her kid to like, find out where babies came from, basically, and so wanted all books about like, the reproductive system to be like, pulled. Um, and of course her child was very curious, and like, seeking this information out, and the mom like, freaked out and was like, “She's traumatized by this. You shouldn't have this in the library.” And like, I was like, “No.” I mean, it had to—it like, was a whole process that went through the head of school, and the assistant head, and the counselor. And I was just like, “No. Like, you know, these materials are professionally recommended for children from this age to this age. It—it is fine. Like, they're going to stay.” Um, and that was it. Like, I'm—I've gotten really good at talking people through their concerns, and also—also, like, a lot of it isn't like—if a parent doesn't want their kid to check out a certain kind

of book, I'll often talk to them about like, you know, "Your job in this is to talk to your child about why you don't want to—you know, how it makes you feel, what you're worried about—and then you have to tell me that, and then I can—I can reinforce that with your child, but I'm also not going to tell your kid what they can and can't do, because that is the opposite of my job. So your job is to provide that reinforcement at home, your job is to tell me that you're providing that reinforcement, and then my job is to remind this child of your expectations and then let this child make their own decisions." And it usually works. Like, sometimes a book will come home a second time and there'll be another conversation at home about that, but I would rather kids be involved in this process and it be a learning experience than just have me say, "No, you can't have it because your mom says so," because that's also like, "I'm not your mom. I don't care, actually. It's not my job." And I've also gotten better at, um, forestalling this question. So like, if a kid checks out a book that I know is like, a little bit weird for them, I'll talk to them about why they want it, and then I'll send an email home and be like, "Hey, just to let you know, your kid checked out this book. I know it seems weird. Here's why they wanted it," you know, "You're welcome to talk about it at home. If you'd like to come in tomorrow to choose a new one with them, you're welcome to do so." And that's helped a lot, too. Also, a lot of times parents don't read the books. They just assume what they are. Like, um—like the *Captain Underpants* books. My first year, I had these two moms come in holding them literally like, pinched between two fingers, saying, "Don't let my child take these books home anymore." And it was my first year. I was like, 28 and very scared. I was like, "Okay, okay, I'm sorry! You're right. I'm so sorry. Oh no." And then a couple years ago, I read every single *Captain Underpants* start to finish, and they're brilliant. They are brilliant and subversive and like, intellectually challenging and funny. And so now, like, whenever parents are like, "Oh, should he be taking *Captain Underpants*?" my answer is, "Yes, definitely. You should read them, too, because they're great." So that's been helpful, too—is just like, actually engaging with the texts so that I can better defend them, which seems so obvious, but you don't think about it when it's just like, *Goosebumps* or um, *Captain Underpants* or whatever.

Tennenbaum: Mmm. Awesome. So, with your relative freedom there—um, do you feel like that's a product of the specific school, it being private versus public, um, the kinds of parents that enroll their child?

Lukoff: Yeah. I mean, it's definitely partially related to being a private school, since I don't have to follow, you know, specific mandates that come from—that come in public education, which is good and bad, I guess. Gives me a lot more freedom, which I like, but it also might mean that I'm not—that like, the kids are getting just, different levels of education. Um, look, I wouldn't be surprised if public school librarians are better at specific skills, um, and I'm more like—I don't even know. I would actually need to talk to more public school librarians to find out what they—to see how we differ. Um, but I think a lot of it's just my school's culture—like, they've always just had a solo librarian. It's never been a team. And also, before I showed up there had been one librarian who had been there for many, many, many years—like, 20 years, I want to say—and then after him there was some fairly rapid turnover, and then I've been there for going on six years now—so I also helped like, shape the program in a like, consistent way that has like, a sustained scope and sequence of curriculum that goes from like, the youngest children all the way up to the oldest children, that I've, you know, developed and refined over the year.

Tennenbaum: And what's the age range of children you work with?

Lukoff: It is two years old through fifth grade. So very, very, very small to just starting middle school. Yeah, it's—I really like that age range. It's really fun. Sometimes I wish I worked with older kids as well, but I also love that age—the age range. And I see every single child, so I get to know them all really well. That's really nice.

Tennenbaum: Are there any specific books or conversations that you've gotten into the library that you're especially proud of or happy with?

Lukoff: Um, I read *Animal Farm* to my third, fourth, and fifth graders last year. That was great. They were all super into it. Um, they were all bored the first like, two chapters, and then they got really into it. Um, I loved stopping and being like, “Do you think the pigs are telling the truth?” and they're like, “No, they're not! They're lying to them!” One kid was like, “Is this a dictatorship?” I was like, “Kind of.” One kid—one fifth grader marched into the library one morning and she said, “I have a question. Is Napoleon based on Stalin?” because like, “Yep,” and she said, uh, “Is Snowball based on Trotsky or Lenin?” and I said, “Well, he's kind of a mix of both.” And I said, “Well, I have a question for you. Do you know who Old Major is based on?” She was like, “No, who's that?” I said, “He's based on someone named Karl Marx,” and her dad was right behind her, and he was like, “Oh, we talked about Karl Marx last night.” And I started like—so, she was a fifth grader, but I also read it to the third graders, and they were all like—I remember this one girl who was a third grader at the time, who had always been like, fairly quiet in the library—like, never too engaged intellectually with anything—but for some reason, she just got really into *Animal Farm* and got so mad at the pigs, and like, so upset about everything. And it was the first time that I ever saw her like, really engage passionately with, um—with a book like that. It was great. Um, one child—the same fifth grader who was asking about like, Stalin—was just—she loved Boxer—you've read *Animal Farm*, right?—okay, so she loved Boxer. Um, and the whole time, she was like, “I love Boxer. He's my favorite. He's so cute,” and at one point like, halfway through, she was like, “I hope nothing bad happens to him,” and she saw my face—and my face must've like, changed, and she was like, “Oh no!” and she started screaming. She was like, “No! Don't tell me!” Um, and so for the rest of the—for the rest of like, the next week, she was like, “Is Boxer going to die in this chapter?” and I was like, “Not yet, honey,” and she's still mad about it. The last time I saw her, she was like, “Can I sue George Orwell for killing Boxer?” and I was like, “You totally can't. I'm sorry.” It was great. Um, and that was really fun. Uh, I'm proud—and also like, I was wondering if I would get any remarks from parents. One kid was like, “My dad says that you shouldn't be reading this to us,” and I was like, “Well, your dad can come talk to me,” and he didn't. But every other—every other parent that I talked to was like, “It's so great. Like, I didn't read that book until college.” They were like—they were surprised to hear how much the kids liked it, but they did, so I wasn't lying about that. Um, so, yeah. I'm very proud about that. Um, what else? Oh gosh. At the beginning of the semester, I read this book called *Ghost* by Jason Reynolds to my fifth graders, and it is the only book that I've ever read where every single child was completely in love with it, because it's just one of the best middle-grade novels I've ever read, and I arranged—the author, Jason Reynolds, was going to be reading from

it at Books of Wonder, and I got some of my kids to come. Like, we all like, went together. They got to meet him and it was really cute. They were so happy. Afterwards, the kids who—because he read from the opening, and I was reading aloud to them—and the next time I saw them in class, I was like, “Oh, you know, can you tell your classmates about how you liked it?” and they were all like, “He reads better than Kyle,” and I was like, “Yeah, that’s fair. Like, he’s better at reading this book than I am. That is—you are not wrong.” Um, I’m proud of that. What else? I don’t know. I’m proud of a lot that I do with them. Um, I often—like, kids often say like, busted stuff. You know, kids are kids. Like, they’re figuring out what the world is, so like, you might catch them like—you know, if they look out the window—like, I’ve seen kids look out the window and see like, someone with a disability like, walking with a cane or hunching—like, start laughing at them, and I’ll call them on that—or, you know, making jokes about babies born with birth defects, and I’m always like, “Nope. That’s not funny. Let me tell you why.” And like, I’ve gotten pretty good at actually having a conversation instead of telling them what they’re doing. Um, like, I’ve definitely called kids who like, have done something racist, and I’ve said that word, like, “That—what you’re doing right now is racist. You should think about if you want to behave that way,” and then they are like, “Oh, I didn’t—” I’m like, “Yeah, I know you didn’t mean to. That’s why I’m telling you, so you know. So you don’t hurt people later.” Um, a lot of fatphobia, which I am good at calling kids on—um, especially because they never hear people say that like, “‘Fat’ is a neutral descriptor of some bodies. It is not good or bad. It is just neutral, and I don’t want you to—I don’t want to hear you use that word when you’re trying to be hurtful, because it is not a hurtful word, and you’re trying to be hurtful. So, stop it.” Uh, my kids most—I’m out as trans at my school. Not everybody knows, because I don’t like, give everyone a memo at the first day of school every year, but it is not a secret, and it is something that like, I have discussed with them, and that’s been really great. Um, they’re never confused. They’re always just like, “Oh, okay. That’s cool. Whatever.” Um, one time there was this first—he was either a kindergartener or a first grader. I don’t remember how old he was—and he has a big brother who was also in the school, and at one point he was looking at like, a bunch of pink graphic novels or something. He was like, “Aw, these are girl books!” and I was like, “Actually, buddy, you know,” and I said something about how like, when I was a kid, my parents let me read whatever I want, and I read lots of girl books like *Angelina Ballerina* and *Baby-Sitters Club*. And he looked at me and he said, “Did you used to be a girl?” And I couldn’t tell if he knew I was trans or if he was just trying to be a jerk about it, so I kind of like, elided the question. I was like, “Well, you know, when I was a kid I got to read whatever I want,” or something. And he said, “No. I know it’s true. My brother told me that you used to be a girl, and then you took medicine to turn you into a boy, and that’s why you changed your name.” And I was like, “Ah. Well, your brother’s right, but I still like girl books now, which means that anyone can like them,” and he was like, “Okay.” He just kind of ran off. Um, and the only other time that he brought that up—I had no idea that his brother knew, either. His brother had never like, breathed a word to me. Um, and then like, the next year that same kid—I was reading his class this book called *Rough, Tough Charley*, which is a rhyming book about this person named Charles Parkhurst who was probably a trans man, but that language and identity didn’t exist at the time, and at the end it’s like, revealed that quote-unquote, “he was really a woman” or something. Um, and the same kid raised his hand and was like—well, he didn’t raise his hand, because he never does—but he said, “Oh, did he take that medicine, too?” and I was like, “No, they didn’t have that medicine back then, but back then he just lived as a man.” He was

like, “Oh, okay, cool.” Like, he was like first or second—I think he was a first grader. He was a first grader at the time, and just like, chill about it. Like, it wasn’t a big deal. Um, that’s been really great. I don’t oft—like, it doesn’t often come up in conversation, so I don’t have conversations about it very often, but especially with the slightly older kids, they’re more familiar with the concept just like, in the news, or like, their parents might be discussing it, um, so I’ve had more conversations these past couple years than I did my first three years—also because now I’m more comfortable there. Like, I’m not worried that someone’s going to start like, a nasty rumor about me, or that it’s going to be used against me in some like, gay panic or trans panic way. Um, so the more—the more I feel like it isn’t a big deal, the more comfortable I am talking about it more casually with kids, but it also just doesn’t come up that often, because they don’t care about me. They’re children. Like, I don’t exist outside of the library, because they’re kids.

Tennenbaum: So it sounds like you see the—you see that it’s been coming up more in the past two years, as perhaps a combination of your own comfort with it and popular culture?

Lukoff: Definitely, yeah. Also because with the slightly older kids—the third and fourth graders—this year we started something called like, the social—social justice morning meetings, um, which is so great. And it’s where we just talk about like, current events and stuff. So the teachers in that age are also bringing it up more in the classroom, and because it’s like, social justice morning meeting, like, we—we are talking about things that they’ve heard about. So like, you know, Black Lives Matter comes up, reproductive rights come up, refugees and immigrants come up in kind of the same way. But I’m, you know, their local trans teacher, so I often—you know, they’ll often like, direct those questions to me, which I think is ideal, because I know more than the other teachers do, just because it’s my life and community.

Tennenbaum: How do you think, um, the children you work with—um, how are they processing like, mainstream media accounts of trans and queer topics?

Lukoff: I don’t really know. Well, I do know that most of them—or many of them—are very focused on marriage—like, partially because that’s such a safe way to talk about like, same-sex desire or love with children, it is often filtered through marriage, um, which I find a little frustrating, but I’m also not going to get too up in arms about it. Um, so, yeah. I would say it’s mostly filtered through like, who can and can’t get married, who can and can’t like, “love each other,” so to speak. I—so, as part of our social justice morning meetings, the kids were allowed—for like, the last few weeks or like, last couple months—were allowed to break up into—they could choose what group they wanted to be part of. So, some kids were like, in a Black Lives Matter group and some kids were in a reproductive rights group, and I had a couple—three kids—three or four kids who wanted to be in the quote-unquote “LGBTQIA+ Group,” except they didn’t actually know what all of those letters meant. They were just parroting them, which honestly kind of bothers me, um, because like, they didn’t—because they didn’t know what each word—what each letter signified, they weren’t able to parse what subject was about which identity. So like, something specifically related to intersex people is different from something that only affects lesbians who aren’t intersex, and like—but they—because they weren’t given enough scaffolding to understand each individual letter, they just kind of lumped it all together, um,

because that was coming from their like, well-meaning straight teachers, who I really like and have respect for, but, um, they were just kind of parroting LGBTQIA+ without knowing anything. Actually, this was hilarious. One girl—a fourth-grader—was like, “I know what all the letters stand for. Um, lesbian, gay, bystander...” [laughter] I just cracked up. It’s like, “I’m not laughing at you. It’s fine. It’s just very funny.” Because they’ve also been talking about like, bystanders and bullies and [inaudible], so like, those just all kind of run together in the mind.

Tennenbaum: This brings me to a question of identity politics. I suppose in the teaching climate and also the books that you’ve been seeing coming out for children, specifically from ages two to fifth grade, um, how has specific language been used? Has it been like, taught—of like, “These are some proper terms to use,” or does it seem more focused on concepts and patterns of experience?

Lukoff: Um, I would say that the most successful books are the latter—are like, patterns and experience and concepts, um, because like, that’s—that’s what makes literature art, as opposed to just like, a how-to manual. Um, there is more of a push now—I don’t know, is that even true?—there is slightly more of a push now for more like, authentic, diverse representation in children’s literature, which is great, but since publishing is still predominantly dominated by like, straight white people, um, those are all still necessarily filtered through those imaginations. So, you know, from—like, I wouldn’t be surprised if like, from every—from like, of the handful of excellent books published this year by, for example, like, Muslim women or like, recent immigrants, or whatever—for every like, five books we get published, there’s probably five hundred books that might actually be as good if not better, but the gatekeepers don’t like, want to accept those specific narratives. Um, I’m sure it’s more complicated than that. I’m just really bitter about publishing in some ways. There is more of a push for identity-based literature—and not just realistic fiction—Like, you know, space and adventure and genre, mystery stories—that aren’t just about like, straight white kids, um, which is wonderful and also like... The power structures in place are still the same, which makes me question like, what stories are still not being shared, you know?

Tennenbaum: So are there any strategies you use to mitigate the effect of those gatekeepers and get access, and find ways of sharing, um, the more—the literature that’s not as well-distributed?

Lukoff: Kind of? I mean, I do try to get stuff—like, I will get stuff that’s like, independently published or self-published if I like it, but there’s so much, and it’s really hard to sort through like, what’s actually good versus—because like, on the one hand, the gate—like, gatekeepers are going to keep like, excellent stories from getting out there. On the other hand, there’s a lot of really bad writing out there. Like, that’s just a thing—like, and it has nothing to do with like, who’s writing. Like, there’s just—you know, boring or too long, or too meandering—or like, just not accessible for children, even though it’s supposed to be for children. So that part’s been hard. Last year, I went to the Brooklyn Book Fair [Brooklyn Book Festival]—I think that’s what it’s called—and I like, went to different tables of like, you know, bookstores or publishers with children’s materials, and I asked a bunch of people what books they had by people of color, and they all got really uncomfortable—um, which also, one can do at any like, book festival or

conference. Be like, “Oh, so what do you have here by, you know, queer people or people of color?” or whatever, um, and then watch them be like, “Oh, uhhhh,” yeah. Yeah. I don’t know if that does anything, but at least it—like, I want—I want them to think that there is a market, because the only way that these books will get published is if we can prove that it’ll make them money, and if I say, “I will buy this,” then maybe that’ll trickle its way somewhere. I don’t know. Um, I’m not in the publishing industry, so I don’t have really much power in it. Um, I’m hopefully going to be doing some work with the We Need Diverse Books organization soon to help create a guide for assessing picture books for this award, but I haven’t been in touch with the organizers for a little while. I need to be in touch with them soon. I tried, and then they were busy with something, so I should nudge them again. That would be really cool, because like, I want books to be—like, I’m going to—okay, I’m going to speak from my—from like, my own identity, because I don’t want to like, be seen as like—I don’t want to imply anything about any other community that I’m not involved in. Like, for example, I want books about trans kids to be good books first. Like, I think that a book fails if its message is solid but the execution is boring, or clunky, or too long, or pedantic, or didactic, or overly moralistic, or overly like, cheesy. I hate like—I would rather—like, I don’t read those books to my kids, because they’re too smart for them. They can see right through them, and I don’t want a kid to think like, “Oh, all the books about these kinds of kids are boring. I have to read them because they’re good”—like, I don’t want them to be like, you know, brussel sprouts or whatever. Um, I want them to be books that kids want to read because they like, touch them, or because they’re funny, or because they’re just interesting, not because they’re just like, titillating, you know? And I think it’s really important that we judge children’s literature about marginalized communities as literature, because that’s the only way that it will—that’s the only way that it can be good, and actually like, reach children, you know—um, which is not me saying like, trans people or other marginalized people are like, bad writers, because like, most of it isn’t by people within that community. Like, it’s mostly by outsiders looking in, which is probably why it’s so boring. [Scoffs] Yeah.

Tennenbaum: Do you want to talk a bit more about, um, queer and trans inclusion by cis, non-queer authors, and what you’ve been seeing?

Lukoff: They could just—they could just stop. That would be fine. I would be super cool with them just like, not for a while. The only... I keep reading books by cis people about trans people that are really boring and really predictable and really like, just trope-laden, and I hate it. Like, I want it—I think what’s hard—I think that part of why cis people have such a hard time getting it right is because they really want to get it right and don’t necessarily want to make it good. Like, I’ve read quite a few books that feel like the trans character or the trans characters are like, a composite of like, every interview and blog post they happened to come across, instead of like, a real person. Um, and also, they just can’t seem to—they just can’t seem to imagine what a trans character could be or could do without resorting to these like, boring tropes or stereotypes. Also like, they don’t know what we talk about when they’re not there. Like, I think cis people definitely think that if they just do the research they can get it right, but there’s so much more to it than just reading the right books that were edited by cis people, and reading the right magazine articles that were written by cis people, and reading the right interviews where the interviewers were cis, and edited by cis people, because that’s still—it’s still filtered through that limited



imagination, whereas if you were—if you’re actually in the community—and like, you can be cis and be in the community. Like, some of my friends know us as—you know, like it’s—it’s not just trans people. There’s a lot of like—like, in Brooklyn at least, we’re very lucky that there’s such a large community that like, you can have a cis person where like, half their friends are trans, and so they are around us when we’re talking just about our lives, in like, a very natural, organic way, and like, what we joke about, and the way we talk about our lives and our bodies, and our like, dates and our histories, that is like, much more natural and free than what you’re going to come across in like, an official interview like this one. Um, someone actually—my Meredith—Meredith Russo, the woman who wrote *If I Was Your Girl*—said that you can tell when someone is not a member of an id—of like, a community, but also shares—but also engages in that community in a celebratory way. Like, are you at our parties? Are you—you know, do you—yeah, that’s like, are you at our parties? Like, what’s it like when we’re all kind of like, drunk and messy, and like, what do the sober kids talk about when everyone is drunk and messy around them? It’s so different than you read this one book, you read this one article, or even you read these ten books. Like, ten books that are like, written by cis people about trans people won’t give you half the information of like, one messed-up party, just in terms of like, “How are we as humans around ourselves?” Like, what do we talk about when you can’t hear us? This is all—none of this, also—to anyone listening, I would never like, write this in an essay. I’m just kind of like, freestyling right now. So if I listen to this, I might disagree with some of what I’m saying later. I reserve the right to disagree with anything that I’m saying. [laughter] Um, it’s just often just boring and—also, because—also, god, because so many of them are so well-intentioned. Like, they want to write books to make the world a better place for these kids. They forget that we’re also like, people who are like, rude and messy, and some of us are racist, and some of us are fatphobic, and—I mean, there are books that portray trans people as being like, racist or like, fatphobic or whatever, but you can always tell when it’s because the author actually doesn’t realize that’s what they’re doing, as opposed to what’s a conscious choice of showing the like, broad spectrum of a community. Like, you can tell when the author makes a joke because they don’t realize that it’s fucked up, versus when a character—when an author intentionally has a character expound on a certain belief that is fucked up because they want to show that possibility. Does that make sense? I guess. I don’t know if that makes sense. Yeah. Like, if you’re too invested in helping us, then you’re going to make us look good but not real, I guess, is part of where I’m at.

Tennenbaum: So then it sounds like it’s almost meant more for a cis readership to learn about trans tropes than for trans kids to feel resonance and like, introspection.

Lukoff: Yep. Or even it’s for cis people to learn about what we’re like, but not necessarily to be interested in a book as a book. Like, I—I was—I’ve been like, having this idea for a while that I’ve been talking over with a friend about—I think when it comes to trans, like, literature or like, other—like, movies or whatever—I think cis people mistake titillation for inspiration. Like, when they come away from a book or movie and say, “I’m so inspired,” what they really mean was, “I was so titillated by this,” but they don’t realize that those are different feelings. Um, like, I think that they’re just still profoundly fascinated by our bodies and by the like, process of transitioning, that it like—it like, activates them. It’s like, a sort of like, “Oh my gosh, this is so [gasp],” but that feeling of titillation is mistaken for an emotional connection or experience. I might be wrong. I

haven't actually like, asked anyone about it, but it seems right. Like, it seems like perfectly intelligent, critical people, like, forget—forget everything that they know about literary criticism or film criticism or whatever when the subject is a trans person, and I don't know if it's because they just don't want to be rude, or because they are actually like, titillated and don't realize that they should just be having an opinion, you know? Or that like, they—yeah, yeah. Like, you're—I sometimes tell cis people who like, gush over a piece of media that I find mediocre to say, "You know, you're actually allowed to critique something. You don't—it is not transphobic for you to say that the pacing in this was all off, or that the ending wasn't rich enough, or that the descriptions fell flat, or that the dialogue was stilted." That doesn't make you transphobic, and it makes you transphobic to say, "I loved this!" when you didn't, actually. That's a big thing for me, is like, you can engage with this literature as literature. You're not allowed to say that like, you know, "I wanted"—you're not—there's ways of critiquing that are transphobic and ways of critiquing that are actually like, perfectly valid. A lot of what I do is like, kind of give people permission to critique a text in ways that are like, valid, you know?

Tennenbaum: And have you—do you think there are any consequences to this reluctance to treat—to um, apply literary criticism to trans literature?

Lukoff: Oh, yeah. I mean, it means that like—it means that like, mediocre literature is taken as the norm, and books that are actually better than that are like, not—somehow like, not—because like, if mediocre literature becomes the accepted norm, then actually good literature is seen as like, unfamiliar and therefore not quite right. Does that make sense? Like, if someone is used to only connecting to like, one kind of like, spoon-fed, bland story, something that actually makes them think or makes them question is like, too scary, and they can't get past that. Like, they're—they just want to feel bad for you. Like, they just want to read a book about a trans kid and either feel sad or inspired, or feel good about themselves for feeling sad. They don't want to actually have to like, question or think about it too deeply, which I think is why like, better literature is being rejected and mediocre literature is being propped up. I could name specifics, but I don't want to get—I don't want anyone to get mad at me.

Tennenbaum: Then, um, perhaps this is an uninteresting question that you just want to shrug off, but, uh, how do you define or characterize trans literature?

Lukoff: Um, that's actually not a bad question, because a novel with a trans person isn't necessarily trans literature, and a novel by a trans person isn't necessarily trans literature. I would say that trans literature is characterized by—well, it does have to have a character who is trans, I would say, otherwise it doesn't really count, unless it was like, deeply symbolic or metaphoric, which is probably too confusing for me—I would say that trans literature is where the character or characters' gender identity and trans identity is a part of the story and is necessary to the story, not necessarily in a plot way—like, it doesn't have to be like, you, know, "And then everyone found out you were trans. The end." But like, the trans character has to be in the story in an important way, and their identity has to matter. Like, really any character could be trans and stealth, you just don't know about it. You know, like, I don't know—um, I'm looking at my shelf of books right now—like in—I don't know, in *House of Leaves*, right? Like, the dad could be

a transsexual man and he just never talks about it. That's totally possible. Or in, you know, *The Lord of the Rings*, all those fucking elves could be trans, and they just don't talk about it. So, a char—like, you have to know that a character is trans, and their transness has to be related to the story somehow. And I would say that I think trans literature is at its best when the understanding of a character's identity and history informs the underlying themes and concepts of the novel, so the character's identities add to the larger questions or concepts being brought up in this text. So like, for example, this is not a novel but it's—it's like a toast, like a speech—um, a couple weeks ago I was at Barnard for like, a reunion event, and Jennifer Finney Boylan gave a toast. Um, and she's a lovely writer—she often writes about being trans, and she often doesn't—and she gave a lovely, brief speech about what it's like for her—so, she's only been at Barnard for three years, and she said that it was intimidating to talk before this group of people who—you know, some of whom were Barnard students thirty or forty or fifty years ago. And the campus has been going under significant renovations. Like, there's several new buildings. The library's been demolished. They're building a whole new building in its place. It's not a slightly campus anymore because of all the massive construction. She said, "What is it like to come back to a place that shaped you that is, on the one hand, nothing like you remember it, and at the same time, fundamentally the same?" And she said, "You know, as a transgender person, this relates to me. What does it mean to have a fixed sense of self but also a shifting reality?" And like, I love that she brought like, the campus—the physical reality of the campus—and our experiences in the past and the present to—as related to being trans. Um, she's—and like, that's beautiful. I love that. She wasn't saying, you know, "Well, when I transitioned, first, you know, I grew my hair," or whatever. Like, she didn't take us through any boring like, nitty-gritty details. It was more like, "What is this feeling of change? How does this feeling of change relate to my identity? How does this feeling of change relate to your college? How does this feeling of change relate to our experiences as people?" That's what I think—and like, this was just a funny speech that she said, you know? It wasn't a novel, but like, that's when I think trans literature is at its best: when the experience of being trans can lead to a deeper understanding of what it means to be human, or a novel about a human experience is filtered through the specific device of a character being trans. That was—I didn't know you were going to ask that question, otherwise I would've come up with a more pithy answer.

Tennenbaum: I like the—

Lukoff: I think I did fine.

Tennenbaum: Yeah.

Lukoff: Her speech was really good. It like, really touched me. She also made a joke about how like—this whole New England farmer joke—a lot of like, [w/ New England accent] "Oh, this is the best shovel. I've never had to replace this shovel. I've had it for forty years. I've changed the blade twice and the handle three times." Like, it's not—it's a different shovel, then. Right? You know, is it a different shovel then? That's apparently an old philosophy question. Like, if you have a knife and you change the blade and you change the handle, is it the same knife? Um, which I

think actually has a lot of implications for being a transsexual, but I'm not a philosophy student, so I don't know.

Tennenbaum: Um, so now—your own writing.

Lukoff: Yes. Uh, well, I already advertised my piece in *Gender Outlaws*, which I still feel proud of, for the most part. I don't identify as a writer. I can get more onto that later, except I'm obviously a writer, so it feels really twee and pretentious to say that I don't identify as a writer, but I like, don't introduce myself that way. Um, I've written a lot of short stories that have been published in various anthologies, which is cool. Also like, some online writing. But I have two picture books coming out. The first one is due out in the Spring, and it's called *A Storytelling of Ravens*, and it's about collective nouns because I love collective nouns, and just, I love them. I'm very excited for that one. And then the second picture book is coming out in the Fall of 2019, if the world lasts that long, god willing, *baruch Hashem*—and that one is called *Explosion at the Poem Factory*. And so—when I was talking about college, I mentioned this club I was in, the Philolexian Society, and every year, Philo has something called the Alfred Joyce Kilmer Memorial Bad Poetry Contest, because Alfred Joyce Kilmer wrote that poem, “I think that I shall never see / A poem lovely as a tree,” and he was a member of Philo. And every year—well, every year since we started doing it—we've had a bad poem contest where people write intentionally bad poetry. Um, and one year—I think it was 2008—my friend Amittai wrote a poem called “Explosion at the Poem Factory.” And it was really funny—it was like, really weird and kind of hard—like, it was kind of uneven. I think he spent—he said he spent like, two hours writing it the day before. Um, but there were four lines in it that really—that I just really loved. And it was, um, “The enjambment jammed / the anacrusis encrusted / the”—no, “The amphibrach broke / the enjambment jammed / the anacrusis encrusted / and the kenning ceased to ken.” And I didn't actually know what enjambment, and amphibrach, and anacrusis, or a kenning were at the time, but I knew that they were like, somehow related to poetry, and I thought that was just such clever wordplay—and the whole poem was filled with brilliant wordplay, um, and I loved it. And then like, eight years later, after my first picture book sold, I had this brainstorm. I was like, “That could be a picture book! That could be great!” because I do a whole poetry unit with my third and fourth graders where I like, show them—because I really love language, I love taxonomy, and I love funny words—so I like, you know, told them what foot each of their names were. So, you know—like, you know, the name Sarah is a—is a trochee, and the name like, Susanna is an amphibrach. Like, it all depends on where the stress falls. I love that like, nerdy technical language stuff. So I wrote—I asked him for permission. So it's not plagiarism. It's all above board. And I wrote a picture book based on the concept of a poem factory exploding, where it follows like, this one person—um, this one guy, who like, gets a job working there, and then it explodes. And I just stole those four lines—I just like, took those lines—um, and I also like, took a couple other little bits here and there, like, “The spring fell out of the sprung rhythm and landed acrostic the shop floor.” So there were definitely like, some percentage of sentences that are just like, taken directly from his poem with his permission, but then the rest of the narrative, I came up with, and I also came up with my own wordplay. Um, and I'm really excited about it. It's so nerdy, and it's so fun. And I also wrote—so, at the back it was going to be a lot of—a glossary, to explain like, each—because you don't need to know what an amphibrach is to know that the ambhibrach broke. Like, you don't

need to know what that is. Or like, you don't need to know what a volta is when you know what a volta-tron is. Like, it's just a machine. It's called the volta-tron. Who cares what a volta is? But at the back, I explain like, every single device that I use. Like, this is what a foot is, this is what blank verse is, this is what a sestina is, this is what a caesura is. Um, and so for some of them I've just like, written examples. Like, I couldn't really figure out how to explain what a sonnet is to children, so I said, "A sonnet is a complicated form of poetry. Here is an example of a sonnet." So I just like, wrote a sonnet for them. It's like, a ses—a sestina—is it ses-TIN-a or SES-tin-a? I don't even know. I should find that out. Um, you know, "A sestina is another very complicated kind of poem where the last word in each line repeats itself in a specific pattern. Can you figure out the pattern by reading this sestina?" So I just like, wrote a sestina. It was so fun. Um, I'm super excited for that one. And, ugh, I wish that this interview were happening in like, a month from now, when I have more information. I can like, update you later. But I feel like I'm about to sell a picture book about a trans boy. I think I'm really close to it. I don't want to jinx it, um, because I thought I was really close a few months ago, and then they said no, and that pissed me off. But I think I'm really close, because this one editor read it, and she said that she really loved it, and she showed it to the other editors, and they were impressed by it. And she said, "Can you make these revisions to it," and I—and so now I'm like—I'm revising based on her comments, and it might not happen with this publishing house, but I'm really hopeful, because I love it, and it's so good, and so cute, and so sweet.

Tennenbaum: Tell me about it. Unless that's giving it away.

Lukoff: Um, I'm not going to—like, I mean, who knows if this will ever get published, so maybe this like, will become an archival like, source of a non-existent picture book, or maybe this will be like, the first time that the pub—I don't know. We'll see. Um, I don't want to jinx it. But, it's—the tentative title is *Aiden and the Baby*. Aiden because it's such a common trans name, and it also works for a little kid. It like—it's kind of an inside joke, but also, there's a lot of children named Aiden, so it's not actually like, wrong, you know? Um, it's called *Aiden and the Baby* and it's about this little kid, where the first—the first third of the book is him—is like—so, it starts off saying, "When he was born, everyone thought he was a girl, and here's all the ways that they like, raised him as a girl, and then he realized that he really wasn't any kind of girl. He was really just a trans boy." Um, so that's like, the first third, because I also like—I didn't want to dead-name him, I didn't want to talk about his body, and I also didn't want to make it his fault that he was like—like, I didn't want to make it his problem. I wanted to really put the emphasis that like, all these people are assuming something wrong about him, and it's not his fault, it's their fault. Um, and then his—and then his, uh, mom is going to have a baby, and so the next—the next like, two thirds of the novel—more than two thirds—are him and his family preparing for the baby, but figuring out how to welcome this baby in a way that isn't like, coercing it into a gendered expression. So like, when he was born, they bought him like, dresses and painted his room pink, but for this baby, they're going to do all this other stuff that isn't gendered. And he feels like it's really his job to make sure that this baby feels welcomed and supported immediately, but then he starts to get anxious, because he's like, "Oh, but what if the baby doesn't like this? Like, what if this is all wrong? What if I made all these mistakes?" And then his mom says like, "Well, it's okay. Like, we made some mistakes when you were born, and you helped us fix them." Um, it's

really good! I'm like, almost crying just talking about it. Um, I'm not quoting it directly because like, I don't know, copyright or whatever, but that's like, the gist of it. It's really sweet and it's really good, and I love it, and people are stupid for not wanting it.

Tennenbaum: I would love to read that.

Lukoff: It's really good. Um, I'm actually like, getting all emotional now, because it's just so sweet. Um, it's like, sweet and it's also like, not misogynist and it doesn't say like, "Aiden hated pink because pink is for girls," because like, that's misogyny and I hate that. Um, he's just—he's just a boy. He's just a little kid. He wants his little sibling to be happy. It's really good. Um, I'm actually going to hopefully meet the editor that I've been corresponding with this weekend, and maybe we'll have a chance to talk about it, but her revisions are like—they're good revisions. Like, none of them are like, "You should make him be more trans," or less trans, or something. Her revisions are like, "Can you foreground this tension sooner? Can you make this last moment a little bit more active and less passive?" which I'm sure I can do. I just really want this book to happen, because it's so good. I love it. And again, with like, mediocre literature being published, I'm convinced that part of why it's having so much trouble with other editors is because it's not what they're expecting to see. They're expecting to see a trans book that's like, "When Aiden was born, he knew that he was a boy immediately, even though his body was wrong and gross, and then everyone bullied him until he bravely stood up for himself, and then everyone accepted him," because that's—that's like, every book, and I'm so sick of it. Like in—I also really didn't want him to be bullied in this book. Like, I wanted the emotional journey to be like, his own feelings of like, love and uncertainty and like, you know—his own like—his own projections onto this child when he's trying to not project anything, and like... Yeah, I wanted it to be like, a much more internal, emotional journey, and not just like, you know, "And then people were mean to him for being transgender, and then one person stood up for him, and then everyone was his friend," because it's so boring! I hate that. It's so boring! I don't want to write a boring book. I don't want to read a boring book. I hate boring books. [grunt] But that's all cis people want, is boring books, except for this one person, who seems cool. We'll see. I'm so grumpy about it. I'm so mad.

Tennenbaum: Do you have, um—would you be illustrating it, or do you have a sense of the illustrations?

Lukoff: No. No, I want it to look good, so I—um, so my—no, I can't draw. It would be a disaster if I tried to draw. No one would want to read that book. Um, so it's a—if you're not illustrating it yourself, then it's an editor's job to place you—to pair you with an illustrator. So my first two books—so my first illustrator, for *A Storytelling of Ravens*, is a woman named Natalie Nelson, who's very talented, and I'm really excited to see the final draft. Um, what's funny, though, is that I think a lot of people outside the industry don't realize that I have—at least for my first two books, I have zero control over the illustrations. Like, zero. I mean, hopefully if I said, "I super hate that," they would take that into account, but it's not under my control at all. Um, actually, I've only seen one page from my first book so far, and she interpreted my—so, I had my own imaginary of what the page would look like, and she interpreted it entirely differently. Like, I never even thought about that possibility, and it's completely different. Um, and it's fi—I love it.

It's just not at all what I thought it would be. Um, if *Aiden and the Baby* goes to publication, I think that I would need to have a little bit more say in the illustrations, just for a few specific scenes, to be like, "Hey, don't," you know, "Don't have any close-ups on a baby picture of him," for example. Like, I don't like before and after, and that sort of thing. You know, don't—you know, there's a few things to make it like, sensitive or relevant that I would have to give my input on, but like, not so much in terms of like, what color shirt he's wearing or what anyone look—you know, that sort of thing. Or rather—yeah. I think I would have to have a little bit more say with that book, but not—not much more.

Tennenbaum: And your experience with publishers—so, it sounds like, by how you characterized—would you characterize, um, *A Storytelling of Ravens* or *Explosion at the Poem Factory* as trans literature?

Lukoff: Not even slightly.

Tennenbaum: Okay.

Lukoff: Not even slightly. I mean, one could make—one could make an argument that like, a decadent and frivolous obsession with language is inherently homosexual, [laughter] which like, I would, but also like, they're not gay books. I just appreciate the phrase like, "a decadent obsession with frivolous language." That's just me. Oh man, I wish I could edit that part out. That's not nice to say, but whatever. I don't care. Um, no, they're not even slightly. Like, one is about collective nouns of animals, and the other's about a poem factory exploding.

Tennenbaum: And so how—how is it navigating publishers and editors? Do you feel like being trans affected that process for you?

Lukoff: Uh, my books that are not at all related to my identity are—those found a publisher pretty easily, and they found a very good and discriminating and discerning publisher very easily. And my editor, like—honestly, like, she praises my writing to the moon and back. Like, she thinks I'm so talented. Anything that I try to write that isn't—that is like, trans-focused, the reaction that I often get is like, "Oh, look how cute. It thinks it can write like us." I've been—I have been tremendously patronized, um, and dismissed, and treated like, you know, a dancing bear or something. Like, "Oh, it's so cute that it wants to write about itself," whereas my writings that aren't trans or like—or like, in other—in other like, professional contexts, like, I've gotten a lot of like, praise and support for my writing, and I can't imagine that my writing experiences a sharp decline in quality the second it becomes slightly more personal. Um, maybe I'm wrong—like, I don't know—but it's—something feels fishy to me in that, you know? Um, yeah. It's—it's not the best. Also like, you know, with various industry professionals I've like—like, in meetings or whatever, they'll say things that are just transphobic that they don't realize are transphobic, and I'll have to be like, "Uh-huh, yeah. I've actually heard that before. Here's a funny thing about that statement." Like, it's got to—there's something called like—you know, like Godwin's Law on the internet about how like, anything will—will like—if an internet comment thread goes unchecked long enough, it will eventually turn into someone comparing you to Hitler. It's like—the joke is

that it's like—I don't know why it's called Godwin's Law, I should look that up—but it's like, there's got to be some kind of like, Caitlyn Jenner's law, that any time any trans person wants to talk about anything in front of a cis person, they have to bring up their opinions about Caitlyn Jenner somehow. It's so annoying! Um, and like—again, like, because cis people have only ever read books about trans stuff by cis people, they think that certain things are acceptable, and they're actually like, oppressive and offensive. So like, I've had people say like, “Oh, well, what if you had a scene where he did this,” and like, I can see why you want that, and that's actually really offensive, and I will never write a book where that happens, ever. Never. Um, but they just don't—and they're well-meaning, they just don't know, because they don't know any other trans people, or like, they know one other one. I don't know. It's not—it's not easy, or fun, or pleasant. And so like, it—I'm like—yeah, I don't know. I'm sure that this is also like, fairly similar to experiences of like, disabled people, or people of color, or, you know, neuroatypical people or whatever, also—or like, deaf people—have to engage with. Like, it's just all—it's never the same, and like, everyone has privileges and marginalizations in different axes, but I'm sure that if I were to sit in a room with like, a bunch of other people who were not trans, but otherwise marginalized, they'd be like, “Oh my god. That same thing happened to me,” you know?

Tennenbaum: So now, can you tell me about some of your work in literary criticism working for the Stonewall Book Awards?

Lukoff: Oh, yeah. That was fun. Um, [sigh] let's see. I don't—I think that to get on Stonewall—so first, you have to be a member of the American Library Association, and then you have to be a member of the GLBT Roundtable, and then you can apply to be on Stonewall, and I think that they just take anyone who applies. Um, I was on the youth subcommittee. Originally, there was just one committee that read everything, and then, because there started to be more and more and more young adult and children's literature, they split it up into two communities, which—or, two committees, which I think makes a lot of sense and is really smart. So it was really just like—so, over the course of the calendar—you start reading in like, January, and then you—and then publishers will send you every single book that they think is eligible, and to be eligible, a book just needs to have LGBTQ themes, which means that some books might like, literally be like, a coming out story, or about like, a trans superhero or whatever, but then there's some books where like, the main character's cousin is gay and shows up on like, three pages towards the end, and like, I—thanks for wasting my time with this book. I'm kind of pissed off that you think that this is relevant. Um, a lot of books about trans people by cis people.

Tennenbaum: So the queer themes have to be explicit? They can't be like, the philosophical kind of like, transness, like this feels like it has trans resonance?

Lukoff: Um, I mean, we've definitely gotten some of those, but if something isn't at least like, kind of explicit—I mean, it's for kids, right? Like, *The Ugly Duckling* has been retold a million different times, and it's not suddenly trans now, although I've seen publishers try to be like, “Oh, this like, retelling of *The Ugly Duckling* is relevant for trans kids.” Like, no, you literally just discovered that trans kids existed, and you want more money. Like, fuck you, it's just *The Ugly Duckling*. Like, stop it. So mad about that. Yeah, I mean like, there's some books where like, it's



just like, a fairly typical story, but the character has gay moms or something like that. It's like, a whole spectrum of representation and themes. Um, so the way that worked was that you read every single book—or at least, I—or, one should read every single book—um, and then there—sometimes there's like, lengthy email discussions or debates about books, but this year, there weren't that many. Um, and then you—and then, towards the end of the year, in like, November-ish, you vote on your favorites, and then that is like—then that's—then there's a list of like, the top twenty or thirty, and then of that top thirty or whatever, you vote for your top ten, and then those top ten are what, um, we bring to discuss at the meeting. And we really have one day to deliberate. It's like, one day in January where we all just sit around a table and argue. Um, it's really fun, actually. What's interesting is that there's no identity requirement for being on Stonewall, so there's always straight people on it, but like, that doesn't necessarily—like, I disagree with queer people all the time, so it doesn't actually necessarily mean much, although I would prefer it if it was like, more queers. Um, yeah, it can get pretty heated. Like, also because the—uh, the criteria are fairly vague. It's just books that have a noteworthy representation of the LGBTQ experience, so it doesn't necessarily have to be the best-written book. It doesn't necessarily have to be for the most groundbreaking book. It doesn't necessarily have to be for the most creative or inventive book. So the—the word like, “best” is very, very, very subjective. Um, for me, “best”—this, again, is subjective—but for me like, the Stonewall should go to the books that expand—either expand or exemplify what the genre is capable of, so that was what I was reading for. Is this a lovely story that I've read ten times before? Then it's great, but it doesn't expand or exemplify the genre. Or, is this a story that I've read before, but something about like, the writing or the characters is so like, rich and deep and gorgeous that it exemplifies what this is capable of, and that might be eligible even though it good—the narrative itself isn't groundbreaking. Um, I find it's like, a delicate balance between like, groundbreaking and exemplary, um—and, but it's always—it always has to be weighed in one direction or the other, but they both are important.

Tennenbaum: And do you think having this kind of award is important? Like, what kind of work does it do?

Lukoff: Yeah. I mean, one thing that I definitely think is that, uh, especially for libraries with limited budgets, or with like, stricter collection, uh, policies—like, so, for example, my first year on Stonewall, the book *Sex is a Funny Word* won a Stonewall honor. I hadn't heard about it until they sent it to us, and it is one of the most perfect books I have ever read in my entire life. I love every sentence in that book. And also, it is not—it is not explicitly a queer book in the way that straight people understand it. Um, so after a lot of arguing, we gave it the honor, and then immediately after that, the publishers started getting so many more notices from people wanting to buy it. Like, I went to libraries where I saw that they had received it two weeks after the award ceremony. They would have not gotten that book if it hadn't won the Stonewall, either because they didn't know about it or didn't realize that it was any different from any other like, pre-puberty book or whatever. So I think Stonewall does a really good job of either bringing books to people's attention who might not have had that otherwise, giving libraries an excuse to purchase books that they might not be allowed to otherwise, and also, um—oh, and then the third would be, uh, providing a like, professional safety net for librarians if a book is challenged. Like, “Oh,

you can't shelve this here. Like, this is inappropriate." "Well, but look: the American Library Association gave it an award. That's not my fault. Like, this is just officially good." It gives it like, a like, official seal of approval. And then for some books, um, I think giving it an award pushes publishers to recognize that queer content doesn't just have to be like, only for queer people. So like, the book that won the children's award this past January is a Rick Riordan book. It's the second book in the Magnus Chase—so it's like, the second book in his fifth series [*The Hammer of Thor*] about just like, mythology and like, kids having adventures and saving the world with like, swords and fart jokes and stuff, but in the second book he introduces this character named Alex Fierro, who is a—who is genderfluid—usually goes by she/her pronouns, sometimes goes by he/him pronouns—and she's an amazing character. Like, he is the only—he might be the only cis person that I've ever come across to write a trans character in a way that feels deeply right and good to me. I read this—I kept waiting for him to piss me off, and I kept waiting for him to offend me or hurt my feelings, and I just kept loving it. She was so good. He did such a good job with her, and after the award ceremony, I kept having people be like, "Yeah, I didn't bother to read that one, because like, it's just another—why would I read that one? It's for kids. It's just another," whatever. And I think—I think that giving Rick—giving Magnus Chase the award is like, "Look, you can have queer and trans children in any story. They can be like, shapeshifters and valkyries, and they can like, have adventures. They—it doesn't just have to be about a kid who like, comes out and then is bullied, and then is inspiring." Um, so I think that the Stonewall Award has a lot of different, um—it has a lot of potential power in a lot of different directions, and I'm really proud of the work that I did on it—me and my friend Thalia. She is one of like, the best allies I've ever met, and like, we—we actually would like, strategize our arguments. Like, you know, "When are you going to talk? When—like, what points should you make because you're cis and they'll listen to you, versus what points should I make because I'm trans and they'll feel guilty if they don't agree?" Like, we were actually like, carefully strategizing our arguments. And we even disagreed about some books, um, but never on like, a deep political level. Just like, "I like that one. I didn't like that one. That's okay." So I feel good about that.

Tennenbaum: Is there anything else about, uh, being on different book committees and literary criticism circles that you'd like to speak to?

Lukoff: Um, not really. I feel like I should be more out there—like, I should write and publish more—but I'm also busy, and I like to read, and I like to do my jigsaw puzzle, and I like to hang out with my friends, so I don't just want to like, complain about trans books all the time. Um, but I'm slowly starting to review them on my blog. I've only done two so far, and I should start doing more, but also like, I hate reading them. It just—it hurts my feelings, and it gets me mad, and I don't like to make myself hurt or mad, but I'm slowly forcing myself to re-engage with texts that I dislike, and then talk about why, because I think that's valuable, even though it's super unpleasant.

Tennenbaum: Who do you see as your audience for those book reviews?

Lukoff: I don't know. I honestly don't even know. Like, I'm not advertising them too much. Like, I don't—I don't have a big social media presence. Mostly, at this point, if someone's like, "Hey, did

you like this book,” I can be like, copy-paste, “Here, read this.” I mean—like, I actually also want to start a more like, comprehensive list of books that I like or don’t like, so whenever someone’s like, “Hey, can you recommend—” copy-paste, “Just read this list.” Like, every week I get, “Hey, can you recommend?” I’m just tired of it. Which—I understand why people are coming to me. They’re not wrong for coming to me, it just also, like—I do this for a living. I don’t feel like doing it when I’m at home.

Tennenbaum: I can’t believe I haven’t asked you this: um, why—what’s in your fascination with specifically children’s and young adult literature?

Lukoff: Um, so, when I was first working at Barnes & Noble, I would just—would work in whatever section they would put me in. I really liked the history section, because I really like history, and I really liked the fiction section, because I like fiction. And then I started working in—I’ve always liked kids’ books, because I was a kid who liked to read, but I never really saw them as a specific art form or genre, um, until I started working there after law school. I was eventually put in the kids’ section semi-permanently, um, and that’s when I actually started liking kids as like a demographic, instead of being like, scared of them or annoyed by them. I just really started loving kids. Um, I think I always—like, in terms of picture books, I think I always had an intuitive understanding of what made a picture book successful versus unsuccessful, but it was really not until I started actually like, working at my job that I was able—because like, I would read hundreds of picture books, and I would read the same picture—like, what was actually really valuable is that I would—in the course of my job, I would read one picture book ten or twelve times in the course of a week. Like, in one day, I might read the same picture book six times in a row, because I’ll read it to three different classes split up into two half groups each. And that much rereading, I started to realize the underlying patterns in them—like, how the authors structured the information or the stories so that kids could understand it, how repetition functioned to help kids process the information, how the word choice would like, echo back or forward, how—how an author might put in little jokes for adults to appreciate that kids wouldn’t quite get, but would still somehow deepen their understanding. Like, um—like in *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, the last—one of the last lines is, “He drew up the covers,” and he’s like, drawing them with his crayon but also drawing up to like, pull up, and like, it’s just so—but it’s set up, “He drew up the covers, and then the purple crayon dropped to the floor, and Harold dropped off to sleep.” Like, that repetition of language is so poetic and lovely. And also, I think part of it is just like, being contrary, because a lot of—one person, who shall remain nameless, once said that kids’ books don’t count as literature because—for the same reason that gourmet chefs don’t like baby food, and that means that you don’t know anything about children’s literature, because a good picture book is a unique work of art. One—actually, Jason Reynolds, the guy who wrote *Ghost*, was saying how, you know, he’s incredibly successful as a young adult and middle-grade author, but he’s having a beast of a time with a picture book, because he says it’s like painting the *Mona Lisa* with half of the colors. And it’s true you have to create a story that is as like, rich and emotional and like, well-developed as any novel in less than a thousand words, and unlike a poem, which can easily be under a thousand words, children have to understand it and like it. They can like it on a different level than an adult—like, I don’t understand a four-year-old to understand the beauty of drawing up covers, and then dropping a crayon and dropping to sleep—but it still gets in there

somewhere, like, for kids to develop sort of a love of literature, they have to have good literature. Um, and—I mean, I also love picture books because they’re so hard. Like, that’s why in my—in like, *Explosion at the Poem Factory*, I wrote a sonnet and a sestina, because those are really hard, and I like challenges. I like—actually, there’s a bit in, um, *A Wrinkle in Time* where Calvin is talking to Mrs. Whatsit—one of the witches, I don’t remember which one—and she says, you know, “Can you—do you know what a sonnet—can you explain a sonnet to me?” and he says, “Yeah, it’s a strict form with like, strict meter and rhythm,” and she compares life to being like a sonnet. Like, the—there’s strict rules, like, you are—you die, and you’re born, and you’re trapped inside of a body for all of it, but what you do with that is up to you, and I love the idea of—of having relative freedom within strict confines. I think that’s a really fun and difficult challenge, and picture books are that. Like, picture books are like a sonnet or a sestina. Like, there are rules. There are conventions that you have to obey if you want children to be able to understand and appreciate and enjoy it, but also, you can say what—you can talk about whatever you want, you just have to figure out a way of breaking it down for them. Um, same why I really enjoy being a teacher, because I’ve found that I start to understand concepts better, because if I can’t explain something to a first-grader, it means that I don’t understand it very well, and so it has also helped me deepen my understanding of really thorny topics in order to explain them to children, and I really—I really love that challenge, and I love the challenge of picture books in that way. And that’s why I get so frustrated when people—when like, A) when I see mediocre ones out there, because like, they can be so beautiful—and also like, I have so many people who’re like, “Hey Kyle, I have a great idea for a picture book.” I’m like, “Cool, are you ready to write fifty drafts of something under 800 words? Does that sound like fun to you? Good luck.” Like, they’re really, really, really hard, and I think that there’s a misconception that because they are for children and because they are short, they are therefore easy, when they are actually fiendishly difficult to do well—um, but also really, really, really fun. Like, I love the challenge of like, “How can I—how can I take this, like, complex idea and distill it to its like, essential piece while also not losing out on the concept of like, metaphor and repetition and echoing, and like—like a deeper level of understanding that kids might not understand, but will kind of penetrate their consciousness.” That’s what I’m trying to do with *Aiden and the Baby*. That’s what I really want, and I think I have, mostly.

Tennenbaum: I think my last question is one I have more of a personal interest in about queer and trans literature. It seems like a lot of times, in literary analysis of trans literature, specifically ones that include trans characters—trans and queer characters—um, they tend to be used as figures for talking about broader political issues, and it’s like, they can’t be taken as an individual. They always must stand in for a political conversation.

Lukoff: “This character will teach you about transphobia,” or whatever.

Tennenbaum: Mhm. Yeah. Um, what do you think the value of that is? Does it take away from the art of it all? Does it take away from the emotional resonance? Does it—is it important to do when you have a really well-written and developed character?

Lukoff: Um, I think I’m a little bit confused by the question. So, you’re saying, in—can you give me an example of a book where a character is used as a stand-in for—actually, I mean, I can give

examples. Like, I guess I've seen that before, and it always just—it always feels like the characters are proclaiming rather than talking. Um, I don't know if that—I feel like I'm not quite understanding your question, but yeah, I'm sorry.

Tennenbaum: I guess, um, my question was coming from—not from the writers and the authors but more from like, when groups of people come to analyze the literature, and like, write reviews on them. Yeah.

Lukoff: Oh, okay, and so you're saying when reviewers are looking at a text, they might...

Tennenbaum: Uh, they might put value on the literature and the character insofar as how well it demonstrates like, political concepts.

Lukoff: Oh! Oh. Oh, jeez. Um, yeah. Well, I do see one interesting trend now that is in a lot—not just in queer and trans literature, but other parts as well, where there are a lot of people who want a novel to be a prescription for moral living, and who want characters to do the right thing, and that if characters do the wrong thing, then they are very quickly punished for it, and they learn the error in their ways. Um, not just with queer and trans stuff, but with like, books that are either—that are both like, specifically political and also not particularly politically aimed at all. Um, and I super hate that. Like, I don't want—I want—I like—I want art to be like, messy and difficult. I want it to ask more questions than it answers. Like, I think that if a long novel by a grown-up has characters who either always do the right thing and explain why they're doing the right thing, or do the wrong thing and then have a total moral 180, that's—that's—you're just—that's just a manifesto. You're just telling me what to do, instead of asking questions to make me—that make me think about it. Um, I'm trying to think of an example I could give that I'm not worried about people yelling at me about for later. Like, I feel like there's—okay. Okay. There is—hmm. Okay. A lot of times, people ask me for good books about gender for kids, and I will be difficult and give them books that don't seem like they're about gender but obviously are. But, um, what they mean is they want specific books that are like, “This is about a boy who likes to wear a dress,” or “This is about a non-binary child and their struggles,” or whatever, but my favorite book to recommend about gender is called *Big Mean Mike*. It is a picture book by Michelle Knudsen, and it is about this big, tough dog named Big Mean Mike who keeps finding fluffy little bunnies in his car. And he freaks out because, as he says, “Big, tough dogs do not hang out with cute, little bunnies. Like, what if someone sees me hanging out with you?” Like, he's so concerned about his own reputation as being sufficiently masculine that he's worried that being perceived as like, being nurturing or caretaking towards these fluffy little animals will result in like, basically gender-based violence against him, because he's not—because his masculinity is so, uh—he recognizes that masculinity is incredibly fragile, and he's afraid of what will happen if he's deemed as insufficiently masculine by his peers. Um, and at the end of that book, the bunnies end up standing up for him, and it's great, and then they're friends, and he loves them. Uh, it says, “Big Mean Mike still did everything his own big, mean way, and everywhere he went, four tiny, fuzzy bunnies went with him.” So he didn't—he learned a lesson. He didn't learn to be nice to everybody. He still kind of stayed himself, but it's a much bigger story about what—what is friendship? What is caretaking? What is masculinity? How—in what ways is masculinity

isolating? We don't see him with any of his friends, and as soon as the friends see him with the bunnies, they start to like, tease him, and he freaks out. Like, I think a book where it was like, "And then he learned"—it never spells any of that out. Like, I've asked Michelle about it, and she says that she never intended any of that in the text. She just wanted it to be about this cute story about a big dog and his little bunny friends. Um, and I think that what that picture book does so well—or what that piece of literature does so well—is that it asks these huge questions that you can have a long discussion about with children, with adults, with anybody. And Mike's moral arc—like, his resolution at the end—is still in keeping with his character. He doesn't suddenly get a job at a daycare center and like, you know, wears pink shirts. Like, he—his gender doesn't change and his self-perception doesn't change, but he still has a moral arc. Like, he does have a satisfying resolution, um, because he's like, a—because like, the author sees him as—and he's a dog, but right—but as like, just a person who doesn't—because people are messy and difficult. Like, we don't learn the error of our ways and suddenly become saints. We kind of stay the same, and hopefully learn a little bit along the way. And I hate it when people want young adult literature, especially—I see this a lot in young adult literature—where people—critics and readers, often adults, want characters to have much more, uh, righteous arcs. Like, they want them to be better, the argument being that like, kids—like, teenagers or kids won't know any better if they don't see this character do the right thing. And I don't think that—I don't think that there's any book in the world that can make any specific kid not be a real human being. Like, we suck. We're mean. Like, people hurt people. Like, everyone has prejudices and biases, and like, everyone makes decisions that hurt other people because they're more convenient for them, um, and that's just like, being a person. And like, literature isn't going to make you a better person. It will hopefully deepen your understanding of what it means to be a person coexisting with others, and what other people might be feeling and going through, but it's not going to make you better. It's just going to hopefully lend you a deeper understanding of how your experience coexists with others that are foreign or similar to your own, which might hopefully then guide you in making better decisions in your treatment of people, but isn't going to transform you from like, an average, messy human into like, a being of pure light who makes ethical choices under capitalism and never has a messy break-up, you know? So like, I do think that books—I don't know if I think that books can save the world. Um, I think that they can like, help people come—they can help some people come to a place where they learn how to do that work, but they can't—they're not just going to like, fix a person, because like, we all suck. It's fine. It's just how it is.

Tennenbaum: And um, this is more of a small clarification detail.

Lukoff: Oh, yeah.

Tennenbaum: Um, at the beginning you said that you've been noticing that many books are doing this kind of very deliberate and explicit like, moralizing characters that do explicit—

Lukoff: I don't see that many—there are some books that do it, but I'm seeing people complain when books don't do that.

Tennenbaum: Ah. is that like, more of a recent trend?

Lukoff: I have no idea.

Tennenbaum: Okay.

Lukoff: Pro—I doubt it. I don't think that anything is new. I think that everything has always been the same forever.

Tennenbaum: Gotcha.

Lukoff: I mean, obviously that's not new, right? Like, there's—there's editorial cartoons from the 20's about the dangers of reading, right? Like, um, I think what's new is that like, now I can read everybody's opinion immediately without having to look for it, because it's on the internet. So now, I know what everyone's saying, whereas fifty years ago, everyone would be saying the same thing, but they weren't—it wasn't like, on my computer, because I didn't have one.

Tennenbaum: And—I lied—here's my last question.

Lukoff: Okay.

Tennenbaum: Um, before the interview, you talked about how you like to curate a lot of materials in your apartment.

Lukoff: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, I jokingly call my apartment the Dean Street Archives, which is super pretentious and not accurate, because it's not really an archive, but—um, for example, I wrote my Master's Thesis for library school on sex ed books for little kids, like "Where do babies come from?" books. So I have like, twenty different books from like, 1954 up through current times that explain where babies come from to little kids, and I love those because like, some of them are so weird and—like, there are some that are pretty old that are actually pretty well-done, um, and I love having like, old material that you can't necessarily find elsewhere. I have a lot of old like, gay history. I have—I have a lot of old gay and lesbian and trans history. Like, I have a copy of this book called *Cruising*, which was turned into a movie, that's like—the book is out of print. Um, I have—yeah, just like, a lot of old queer books that are hard to find that I like to keep here because I like to show them to people. I love for my friends to read them. Some of them, I don't let them leave my house with, because I'm like, worried about them, but I also like keeping stuff safe-ish. Like, I don't have any archival quality, you know, like envelopes or sleeves or films or anything, but I like—it's just more of a matter of like, personal comfort. Like, if I have a—like, if I have one copy of this book, then that means that there's at least one copy of this book somewhere. Um, ooh, I have—I have this one book called the—I think it's just called *Christopher Street*. It's a collection of articles from a magazine called *Christopher Street* that I think stopped publication in the 80's. Um, and the collection that I have was published in like, 1981, I want to say, so it was pre-AIDS. Um, and there's an article in it about one—a person was like, writing about the grief—it's called like, "The Lost Generation" or something. He's writing

about what it's like to be a younger gay man and not really know his history, and not really have access to the generation of gay men who came before him, because they're—were like, closeted, or they're all dead or dying or whatever. And he wrote that article like, just before AIDS hit, and that's just so chilling to me, because like, he had no idea what was going to happen in five years—that like, he was going to be another lost generation, but he had no idea. Um, I love materials that reflect gay culture—that like—that reflect contemporaneous gay culture, um, because I think it's so easy for that to be lost. I think it's so easy for us to assume that our opinions now have always been our opinions, or even that this argument is a new argument that no one's ever had before, or that gay men have always been like this, or lesbians have never been like that, or that no one ever talked about trans people. I love having historical materials that indicate what my life could have been twenty or thirty or fifty years ago. Um, I have a lot of really fun stuff. A lot of it is really like, scandalous, and it's great. Um, I also have like, some like, kids' books that are out of print that I'm really happy about—um, or books that I'm not so worried about being out of print but that I just want to have copies of that I can refer to. Like, I have a copy of like, a biography of Bayard Rustin, who is one of my heroes. I have a bunch of Studs Terkel books for some reason. I have like, Joan Nestle. I have a bunch of old trans books. I'm like, looking at my bookshelf right now. Um, I have some—like, oh, on my top shelf I have a copy of *Mein Kampf*, which whenever people come over, I'm like, "I'm not a Nazi. I don't like Hitler. I just think that it's important to know what he was—like, I want to have that text so that I know what was being said about me, and like, Jews in the world." Um, so like, I definitely have stuff that I wouldn't say that I necessarily like, but that I think it's important to like, preserve and refer to, and stuff. So my apartment is not any kind of official archive, but I still like calling it the Archive, just because that's fun.

Tennenbaum: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Lukoff: I don't even remember what I've said, and I don't know how long we've been sitting here for, so probably, but I can't think of it right now.

Tennenbaum: Okay.

Lukoff: So, that's fine, I guess. [Laughter]

Tennenbaum: Well, thank you so much for sharing this story.

Lukoff: You're welcome. I hope that nothing that I've said gets taken out of context and used to defame me on the internet later, because that would suck, but that might happen. Whatever. [Laughter] That's how the internet works. It's not my fault.

Tennenbaum: True.

Lukoff: Alright.