

Episode 3.19 Dealing With Criticism

February 22, 2019

Hannah (Host): [00:07](#) [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda* and I'm recording this earlier in the week than usual because this Thursday I'm going in for oral surgery. Super exciting. Meaning that if you listened to this episode on the day it's released, I want you to picture me on my couch, ice packing my face, high on pain meds, and binging *Parks and Recreation* like it's going out of style. Probably eating ice cream or pudding. I bought like, a bunch of pudding. Anyway, before we get into this week's minisode, I want to mention again a couple of events that are coming up. Specifically an event happening next week at the Vancouver Public Library on Wednesday, February 27th starting at 7:00 PM it is a reading and discussion centered around *Refuse: CanLit in Ruins*. It's a free event. I think it's going to be a great conversation with four really fantastic authors and I really hope that you can make it out. The other event that I want to mention is the panel that I'm participating in at the Growing Room Feminist Literary Festival. It's on March 16th, which is a Saturday I think, from 4:30 PM to 6:30 PM. You can check the festival program for details. If you're in or near Vancouver and you don't already know about Growing Room, I really suggest that you check it out. I've been going every year since I moved to Vancouver. I'm so excited that I get to actually speak there this year, but I'm also going to a bunch of other events at the festival because it's just really fantastic. They do a great job of programming it. They bring in amazing feminist writers from all around Canada, sometimes from outside Canada, and you're sure to find something on the program that's exciting for you. So definitely check that out. And now with no further ado, I'm gonna tell you what my secret feminist agenda is this week. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]

Hannah (Host): [02:14](#) This week I want to talk about handling criticism. So upfront, I want to say that I am not talking about dealing with hate speech, trolling, online or in person attacks, harassment, social media mobs. I'm also not really thinking about public calls for accountability, such as when a listener called me in regarding my failure to get transcriptions up. The conversation about ways to deal with trolling I think is an important one, it's just not the one I want to have today. And I feel like I've already talked quite a bit on the podcast about responding to calls for accountability and what that means in terms of listening to what people are, are asking of you. No, what I want to talk

about today is the very common business of somebody telling you they don't think you're doing a very good job and what you do with that. Now when you work in academia, criticism is a really common part of your work. It's structural to the whole business of producing peer reviewed scholarship, of applying for grants, of applying to get into conferences. You are constantly hearing back from people who are evaluating your work and telling you whether or not it's good enough. When you fail to get a grant, you often get an explanation of why your proposed research project didn't live up to the standards that they set. When you send an article or a book manuscript out for publication, you'll be responded to with peer review, which again may include explanations of the parts of your work that are not up to snuff. The same sometimes goes for conferences, some conferences have peer review built into how they respond to submissions. So you'll, you know, send out a proposal for a conference paper and you'll get back some, some reviews of what people think of that paper. I've obviously talked about peer review on the podcast before because the podcast itself is being peer reviewed, and I've noted that I found the peer review for the podcast generally really constructive and positive. While there's certainly critique in there, it's rarely been in a tone or of a nature that has really called on me to use my, my skillset for handling criticism. But I get a lot of criticism. I've gotten a lot of negative peer reviews in my life. Add into that job evaluations, emails from total strangers, comments on blog posts, and there's a fairly steady stream of feedback coming in from most academics. And I'd say especially for academics working publicly, I mean adding to that, the kinds of feedback that you got about your teaching student evaluations, which are notoriously and often deeply unkind, as well as sites like Rate My Professors, which encourages a sort of cruel online commentary. And it turns out that as a, as an academic, you often have to grow a pretty thick skin when it comes to dealing with criticism. Now by no means do I want to claim that this is unique to being an academic. Again, I can speak from the field that I work in and from the experiences that I've had, but I certainly know that artists across the board deal with a huge amount of critique and rejection. And I'm sure that's the case for a lot of other fields and for a lot of other people. But I will say a positive part of this kind of criticism being built into doing academic work means that over time I've built up some ways of responding or ways of handling it, a kind of tool set that, for me, helps me to process and eventually figure out how to respond to the different kinds of criticism that come my way.

Hannah (Host):

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I'm inspired to talk about this today because earlier this week I received one of said unpleasant emails that contained some

criticism I hadn't really been anticipating, wasn't really braced for, and didn't really know how to respond to when I first got it. And I thought since over the past few days I've been processing that, that maybe this was a good opportunity to talk a little bit about what that kind of processing looks like. I'd really love to hear back from other people for whom this has become a, sort of, necessary skill set about what your process looks like and, you know, to what degree it might be different from the one I'm about to talk about. So step one, for me, in handling criticism is what to do with those initial feelings. I don't know about you, but generally when I read something unkind, or ungenerous, or critical of me or of work that I'm doing, my first and instinctive reaction is to feel hurt and sad. That is more the case when I suspect that the criticism is accurate and I will say that my general inclination is to assume that all criticism is accurate. My default is to say, "ah, a bad thing about me. That must be true. Also, every bad thing anyone has ever thought about me must be true." I mean, [sigh] we can unpack where that comes from, but let's just say that that initial emotional reaction tends for me to be negative and it tends to manifest as feeling really bad about myself. What that means is that I have to resist the urge to respond or react right away.

So a piece of advice that I've heard a lot when it comes to things like responding to peer review of an article that you're working on, is to read the peer review and then put it aside for a while before coming back to work on, you know, the article in question. That's because when you have first read that criticism, when you've first read those responses to your work, your initial emotional reactions can really prevent you from accurately or helpfully unpacking what's actually been said. It's like what my friend and future podcast guest, Zena calls the lizard brain. It's that part of your brain that just has these, sort of, instinctive panic reactions. And it's a useful part of your brain when you are being chased by a lion, but when you are trying to respond and in helpful ways to negative feedback that you've received the lizard brain is not the part of your brain to listen to. You need to give yourself time for other parts of your brain to catch up. So there you go. That's my step one, is register those feelings and resist the urge to respond. So while you're resisting the urge to respond, what do you do with those feelings? I mean, one option is to push them way down deep inside of you into that special treasure trove of terrible things you think about yourself and then just just hold them there. Just hold them there for the next time you can't sleep at night and you need to pull out a litany of terrible and humiliating things that you've done and you can just add on, you know, people telling you that you articulate an argument at an undergraduate level.

[Laughs] You know, just in case, just in case you need more, more fuel for that self criticism fire. But let's say that we didn't want to do that. Let's say that we recognize that that behavior might be unproductive and not in keeping with this podcast's ethos of self care. Well, step two, for me, is reaching out to friends to express my feelings to them. It's something as simple as texting a friend saying, "oh, that's got a really mean email and it sucked." You know? And hopefully your friend responds and says, "Oh, I'm sorry. That sucks. I think you're great." And for me just the starting early on with the process of, of verbalizing or writing down my emotional reaction to the criticism can really help stop me from immediately internalizing it and getting into that kind of, of spiral of self hate. I'm not suggesting at this point that you immediately ask people to help you process the actual nature of whatever feedback it is that you've received just that you express that you're having a bad feeling. Some of you may have seen the tweet that I wrote about this earlier this week just saying, not help me process the particularities of this feedback that I got or this criticism that I got, but just "I got some criticism. It made me feel sad. I am registering publicly the fact of my sadness." I kind of love Twitter for that reason. I feel like it's a pretty good platform to just register publicly the fact of your sadness [laughs]. And I got nice notes and people were very kind and generous with me. And again it helped to stop the, what is often instinctive, reaction on my part of spiraling criticism, whether it's founded or not, into a, kind of, internalized narrative of my own failings. It just kind of breaks that pattern for me a little bit. So step three, for me, is moving from you know, feeling your feelings and expressing those to people in your life into actually starting to process the content of the criticism itself. You can decide for yourself what that timeline is going to look like. You know, in the case of peer review of an article, I know that people will take a week, or two weeks, or a month of the timelines of academic publishing are quite slow. And so there is often time built in for you to really take a step back, get the time to process your feelings, and then come back to the content of, for example, the peer review and give it another look. Time and space may allow you to come back to something that was really uncomfortable in the first place and be able to process it and work through it on your own.

Hannah (Host):

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That absolutely might be the case. In some cases you might need help processing whatever the thing is, whatever the feedback is. You might need to run it by other people. You might need to share it with other people and ask them to help you parse what it's actually saying and, and figure out productive ways to respond to it. In that case, I really encourage

you always to ask people permission before sharing whatever the feedback is, or forwarding emails, or sending them screencaps of of websites or whatever the thing is because you really are asking people for a more significant level of work. In that case, you're asking people to really help you work through something. And so in that case, I will often, you know, reach out to somebody who I think might be in a position to help me process something and say, "you know, I need some help processing X, Y, or Z. Do you have the time to do that or may I forward you this thing or may I send you this picture?" The benefit of that might be pretty obvious. It's that, sort of, external viewpoint on something that you're maybe a little bit too close to or a little bit too inside. Maybe too bound up with those feelings and those instinctive reactions to really get a sort of clear sense of, of what it is that's being said to you. I'm not claiming the other people have objective viewpoints in this case, but other viewpoints can really, really help. And in this case I think it's really important to note that the kind of people you want to ask for help processing this feedback are going to ideally be people with whom you have a relationship of openness and honesty, which is to say ideally you want people who are willing to also offer you criticism, who are willing to also to, to maybe agree with something to, to agree with a possible shortcoming or failure in your work, for example. So to return to that tweet that I sent out where I said, "well, somebody said something kind of mean about my work and I feel sad." You know, I got a bunch of responses that were very, very kind and very, very sweet and they were generally of the tone, you know, "you're great and your work is important." And that's lovely. That's lovely. As part of step two, as part of like, I'm feeling like shit about myself and, and I want to be bolstered by my community, but it's not useful as part of step three. And I kind of think it's important to distinguish these. To distinguish that experience of being bolstered by your community from the important and necessary work of actually parsing and, and working through, and processing the nature of the feedback that you've received. The response can't be, "fuck you, I'm great. All these people on Twitter said everything I do is brilliant." If that's the attitude with which we respond to any criticism that we receive, chances are we're not going to do a great job of getting better at what we do. So that's why that space, either you taking time and space away or you asking for somebody to help you, can really be necessary because at some point it is helpful to come back to the criticism and really work through it, and process it, and really try to figure out, "okay, is there stuff in here that's useful to me as their stuff in here that I can productively respond to? What can I make of this? How is it pushing me to be better? How is it pushing me to think

differently? Are there parts that are just genuinely ungenerous and uncalled for and that I can comfortably dismiss, and are there parts that I really need to listen to? And how the heck do I tell the difference?" And that's gotta be one of the hardest parts of handling criticism, is ultimately getting to that point where you have to decide what to do with it, and deciding how to tell the difference between the parts that you can disregard and the parts that you need to sit with and work with. And there's no clear or easy algorithm for differentiating between those things. There really isn't. There's your own expertise and your knowledge of, of yourself and of your work. And there's the knowledge and expertise and perspectives of people who you trust and admire, who can help you also work through whatever that feedback is. And I think, you know, those are the resources that you have. And, and ultimately you, you have to do your best to figure it out.

Obviously it is easier to receive and process criticism as something that ultimately will help you improve when that criticism is, is framed as such, when it's framed as, as critique, as generative, as generous, as an of close engagement with your work that's intended to help you make your work better. And so that's why I would note to those of you who are in the business of producing critique of other people's work, who write peer reviews, for example, to think about tone and to think about positioning and to think about how it is that you can address your critique in such a way that people are most likely to hear it and to be able to do something productive with it. Because when it comes packaged in an unkind ungenerous or outright cruel way, even if it's super, super useful and insightful and wonderful, the odds are that people aren't going to be able to hear it because it's too hurtful. And at the end of the day, if somebody said something to you that is maybe true and accurate, but they were a real shit head about it and you want to just say like, "fuck this, I don't want to engage with it," that's your prerogative. There's a little bit of a slippery slope here, I can see, into tone policing and saying, "I don't need to listen to criticism if it's directed towards me in a way that makes me feel unhappy." So again, I want to distinguish that I'm talking about really particular kinds of criticism and not talking about calling in, or, or calls for greater accountability. You know, there's, there's a gray zone even between those things. Absolutely. It's not always easy to figure out, sort of, where to place different kinds of feedback or response that you're getting. So I ultimately personally choose to try my best to take what I can out of all of the feedback that I get, no matter how it's worded or no matter how it's framed. Even if it's framed or address in a way that really gets my back up, you know, I still try to take that

space and and do that reflecting and get to a point where I can figure out what there is in there that is useful on that's going to help me do, do my work better.

Hannah (Host):

[19:58](#)

And I guess that leads us to step four, which is response. You've processed the actual, sort of, content of the criticism at this point and you figure out what to do with it. And there's a, there's a couple of things I want to really highlight here. One is the power of what, back when I worked in retail, I used to call "killing them with kindness." That is when a customer would come into the store who was just in a foul mood and couldn't wait to take it out on you, the minimum wage retail employee. The best response, the most effective response was to be so god damn pleasant to them that they just couldn't maintain their anger. If you responded to their anger with your own anger, everything would escalate. You're essentially giving them what they wanted, which was a chance to, to have a fight with somebody who couldn't win. But if you responded with just oh, unrelenting sweetness, nine times out of 10 it would dismantle the whole thing and, and what would come out is that that person was having a miserable day and maybe ultimately just wanted someone to be nice to them. I mean, obviously retail employees are not being paid well enough to do this kind of over the top emotional labor for random strangers and there's troubling, deeply gendered dynamics of this a lot of the time. But nonetheless, it was an effective strategy there. And I find it an effective strategy for responding to criticism, which is no matter how I feel, the feedback was framed when it came to me, I try to take the opportunity to reframe it as positively and as productively as possible when I'm responding to it. Now the means of the response varies widely. If you're talking about something like student evaluations, really what that means is to not let student evaluations transform your relationship with your students, to, to take what you can out of those and to continue to direct yourself with great kindness and compassion towards your students. In the case of if you're responding directly to somebody directly to correspondence or directly to a peer review, that lets you write back, again, it's to respond as though it had been worded in the most generous possible way. To just reframe the conversation such that you assume this kind of collegiality to be the default and that will often produce a kind of reframing of how you're, you're interacting with, with whoever it is that's giving you this feedback. Sometimes the form that your response takes is something like revising a piece of writing, and in that case, I actually do think that the sort of reframing around positivity still applies. Let me give an example. One of the first articles that I ever published, it was based on a course paper that I wrote in a Ph.D. seminar. I sent it out, I, you

know, I'd revised it a bit after the course and then I sent it out for peer review. And I got a very negative peer review that felt, I mean, that's very in keeping with the kind of stuff that I'm talking about today, that felt really cutting, really undermining, and also felt to me that it, it fundamentally misunderstood my work. And my response to it was, "oh, this peer reviewer is an idiot and kind of racist and they suck and I hate them." So I wrote a response that was quite hostile and I revised my paper in a way that was mostly meant to aggressively prove to the peer reviewer that they were wrong by making a bunch of, kind of, pointed additions that were like, "well, some people might think X, those people are wrong because of this, this, and this." I am not the only person who has done this. I have seen exactly the same thing happen when I have been the peer reviewer. Hopefully not that peer reviewer who, who wrote the really kind of mean and ungenerous things, but I've certainly seen people respond to peer review by revising their articles into something that is a, sort of, pointed rebuffing of critique. That's unproductive for a couple of reasons, one is that if an article is pointedly arguing with a peer review that the readers will never see, it's not going to be a very good article. It's like listening in on one half of a telephone conversation. But the other thing is that responding with hostility just amps up the hostility and the exchange and positions that peer reviewer to, to want to say like, "Oh, you think I'm an idiot, I think you're an idiot." Ah, [laughs] and long story short, that article was super duper rejected.

So what I did is what I should have done in the first place, which is I went to a mentor of mine and I said, "you know, I got this rejection. I got this feedback. I don't really know what to do with that. I don't know how to process it. I don't know how to make this piece better. What do you recommend?" And they sat down with me. They read the article, they read the responses. They, they helped me to work through them. They pointed out that in that peer review that I had received purely as a totally unproductive, missing-the-point kind of response, there was actually a lot of really good, helpful feedback. I just hadn't been able to see it because I got my back up so quickly. So they helped me learn how to read that, how to see what was, what was in there that I could use, and ultimately how to use that as a springboard to push my own thinking and to make it better. And ultimately to back up the arguments that I wanted to make, in this case about how Canadian racial politics were playing out in a particular novel, how to frame that argument in a way that would be more convincing to more readers. Which was ultimately my job is to make my work more convincing to more readers. And so at the end of the day, by approaching that

criticism from a standpoint of positivity of I want to take what I can out of this and use it to make what I'm doing better rather than trying to prove that person wrong, I produced a better piece of work. I produced something that I was proud of and when I sent it out again to a different journal, it was accepted right away. So it was a stronger, more polished, more thoroughly thought through, more sophisticated piece of writing. So I'm actually in the middle of going through this process right now. You know, I am at stage three right now where I am asking people for help processing and got a very useful piece of feedback this morning from a collaborator with some, some really good suggestions on how to helpfully reframe and respond to the criticism in question. And I'm going to give myself some more time before I move on to stage four. I'm not there yet. I'm not ready for it. I need to do some more processing. I need to do some more thinking and I'll know when I'm ready to respond when I can go back and look at that piece of criticism and not have that, sort of, instinctive gut clenching reaction when I can, when I can look at it and get some space from it and see for myself what's going on there. And it's okay. It's okay that I need a little bit more space and a little bit more time. Space and time are good things. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Speaking of good things, let's hear from Kaarina [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Kaarina:

[28:13](#)

Oh hey, *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self Care Corner. This week I'm thinking about feelings. When am I not thinking about feelings? Ugh, feelings are exhausting. I would like them to stop, except I don't because when I was adjusting to my antidepressants I felt that weird numbness of like no feelings and it was kind of terrifying. So feelings, I will deal with you. So I'm going to talk about something I struggle with a lot and I don't really have any solutions to it, maybe you do. How do you hold the people in your life accountable for the waste that they hurt you? Specifically when you don't want them to feel bad because you know that they didn't intend harm, but you feel harm and you want the space to feel that harm. And you also want them to know, you know? How do you make space for your own feelings when you maybe, like me, feel particularly guilty about disturbing others or, or you feel anxious about confrontation, or you feel responsible for the happiness of people around you. You don't want to make them unhappy by calling attention to the not okay things they do, but where does that leave you in your feelings? One thing I always come back to is something that Rebecca Jade wrote, I believe on Guts magazine. She wrote that sometimes people's behavior is understandable, but it's not acceptable. Like you can see where people are coming from, but that doesn't mean that

what they're doing is okay. And I, I seriously come back to this statement all the time. I feel like I've probably brought it up on this podcast before. So finding ways to tell people that their behavior is understandable but not acceptable, or they need to be made aware of how you're experiencing their behavior. I'm working on that all the time, forever and ever. And of course I felt the shittiness of being held accountable and having to process those feelings in a way that doesn't exhaust or draw on or further harm the person who is holding me accountable. Whew. Hard work on both ends. let me know if you have thoughts on that. I'd love to hear them. Hannah will tell you how to get in touch with me. It's not too hard. Have a great weekend, my podcast friends. Stay cozy, okay? [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Hannah (Host):

[31:00](#)

As always, you can find show notes and the rest of the episodes of Secret Feminist Agenda on secretfeministagenda.com. You can follow me on Twitter @hkpmcgregor. You can follow Kaarina @kaarinasaurus and you can tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. Rate and review the show, ideally on Apple Podcasts, I really actually don't know if there's rating number of viewing options on other platforms. Somebody told me to check the Swedish iTunes store, which I did, and I found there extremely touching reviews from YohannaMalm, Alva Sweden, and The Sacred Wildling. So thank you, Sw--, Swe--, Swedish people, Sweden, the people of Sweden, I thank you. Just FY, I can only see three reviews from any of the non-Canadian American iTunes store, so if there's more of you, you'll forever remain a mystery. The podcast's theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom jeans off their album Chub Rub. You can download the entire album on freemusicarchive.org or follow them on Facebook. Kaarina's theme song is "I Will" by Mitski. By the way, I've been listening to Mitski his new album *Be the Cowboy* basically on repeat last week, and it is really incredible, strong recommend. Secret Feminist Agenda is recorded on the traditional and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh first nations where I'm grateful to live and work. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]