

Episode 2.25 Soft Bois aka Tender Masculinity

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Hannah (Host): [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is Secret Feminist Agenda. I'm going to start off this episode with a quick announcement. I am headed off on a real vacation next week, like a real actual vacation where I don't do work. And in order to make it a real actual vacation where I don't do work, I've decided to take a short break in producing Secret Feminist Agenda episodes. A two week break specifically. Do not fear, we'll be back on July 27th with the long awaited episode in which I make sourdough with Emily Hoven and it's going to be magical, but before I bet you temporary ado, let me tell you what my secret feminist agenda is this week. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] I want to talk about soft bois or tender masculinity. That's right. I am kind of going to talk about men in this episode. I know, usually not the focus of this particular podcast, but I was chatting with a friend recently about some of my favorite podcasts and how many podcasts I listened to that are hosted by men and what I love about them, and we ended up having this conversation about the really important presence in our lives and in particular in our pop culture consumption of depictions of masculinity that are premised on tenderness and gentleness and how important those have been for us. And so I'm going to talk a little bit specifically about pop culture representations of tender masculinity and how much I love them. That isn't to say that I do not have some very wonderful soft bois in my life. I saw a tweet the other day, I can't remember who wrote it, but it was essentially, you know, "all of my friends are a bad ass women and the soft bois who love them," it resonated very strongly. A lot of my male friends are partners of female friends who are very, very gentle and very tender. And I very much value the gentle and tender men in my life. But I'm going to talk about the gentle and tender men in my pop culture consumption instead. And I'm going to start with a Witch, Please shout out since Witch, Please came back last week and I'm feeling nostalgic for Harry Potter. I want to talk about Hagrid, who's like super, like an icon of tender masculinity starting with the fact that he shows up, this enormous man carrying a pink umbrella. This, this object that he carries around that both signifies the way that he has never fit quite right into the wizarding world, that sort of the ways in which he is an outcast, and the ways in which he's sort of subverted the norms of what is expected of a wizard by hiding his broken wand in this other object. And I don't think it's, it is much of a leap to go from the sort of phallic implications of the wand as a sort of symbol of a particular version of masculinity, and the ways in which Hagrid's wand is broken and he's concealed it in this pink umbrella instead. The pink umbrella, which sort of has, you know, might look phallic while furled, but then unfurls into as much more yonic shape. I should make a note here that I have no intention of collapsing masculinity in the possession of a penis together because not all people with penises are men and not all men have penises, but understanding the sort of symbolism of phallic objects in literature and other forms of culture I think, I think is significant for a discussion of a character like Hagrid. Anyway, later on we see Hagrid, you know, his, his very tender care of

Harry Potter, the, the multiple scenes in which we see him cradling and carrying Harry, his tendency to adopt animals and see the beauty in what other people find monstrous, and also his very, very special and important tendency to refer to himself as "mummy." You know, across the board, Hagrid as a character, sort of plays on the expectations that are affiliated with sort of what looks like maybe traditional or toxic forms of masculinity from the outside. Right? He's enormous. He's hairy. He's bearded. And subverts those in all kinds of really delightful ways. Another sort of key dose of tender masculinity that I've been experiencing in my pop culture, which I know a lot of the rest of you have as well, is of course the Queer Eye reboot. People have already talked about this, but Queer Eye is offering a really powerful statement on toxic masculinity and the ways that it infiltrates men's lives, and not just straight men because they do also have a gay men in the new reboot series who they're making over, as well as on occasion a woman. But you know, they're looking at, at men and the sort of expectations or social expectations of masculinity and the ways in which those are toxic, and particularly, the ways in which they frame men as not being allowed to ask for help, or not being allowed to request tenderness or care in their own lives. And the ways in which that leaves so many of these men deeply isolated and deeply sad without any recourse. And for that reason, my particular favorite in Queer Eye is, of course, Karamo Brown. He is the one who is there to talk to men about their feelings, and about taking care of themselves, and about really tackling the sort of emotional place that they're at. And sometimes it's silly, like he often makes them do activities that are supposed to be metaphors for things, and I'm not convinced that like aerial silks actually helps you overcome your fear of moving to a different city. But there was something I think really, really beautiful and important about the way that the show centers this Black man who is there to talk to people about how they feel. And God, that whole show, that whole show for all of it, you know, weaknesses and problems, there's, there's ample and reasonable critique to be made of it's queer capitalism and the way that it ignores issues of class, but I fucking love it. And I love it for for the reason that I think is at the heart of, of how important these representations of tender masculinity are for me personally. And that is when I really try to put my finger on what I love about these figures, it is that there's part of me that I don't often name or spend a lot of time thinking about that is trained to be afraid of men. Shout out to very, very brilliant author Vivek Shraya's new book called I'm Afraid of Men. I haven't read it yet, but nonetheless, I think that fear of masculinity is ingrained in a lot of us who are taught that men are a threat to us from a very early age and who experience men being a threat to us from a very early age. You know, a lot of our pop culture is filled with representations of violence of men against women. That is of course then amplified by our actual experiences in our lives of that violence. And so often liking a male character seems to demand of us a sort of silencing the part of your brain that experiences that fear because so many popular culture representations of masculinity are about violence. And for some reason, you know, we just have to to, I mean for some reason, for pretty obvious reasons that have to do with patriarchy and it's centering of toxic masculinity rather than tender masculinity, those representations really dominate popular culture. And I was thinking about this really, really in particular this past week

after listening to the most recent episode of Judge John Hodgman, the podcast that John Hodgman, who's a author and sometime television personality, makes for the Maximum Fun Network of podcasts with the head of that podcast network and his friend Jesse Thorn, who is his, his bailiff. If you don't listen to it, the premise of the podcast is that John Hodgman is a fake Internet judge and actual listeners of the podcast bring disputes that he then litigates. And they're very silly disputes. So they're often quite sort of low stakes disputes. You know, a daughter bringing her father to court because he won't stop making the same dumb dad joke. Though often the way in which Hodgman litigates this sort of verdicts that he hands down suggests that he is very, very good at listening to people and that hearing what's actually at the heart of, you know, where, where the issues are coming from. So it's already something really important in that show in that it sort of centers this, this careful listening. There's also something really special in the friendship between John Hodgman and Jesse Thorn, who talk about their friendship openly and tell each other they love each other, which is a really, in my experience, unusual thing to hear two straight men say to each other. But there's also something that's been happening increasingly in maybe the past year of the show or so, and that is that there have been more and more queer and trans and nonbinary litigants coming onto the show. And I think there's all kinds of reasons behind that, but I think I really do think a part of it is the fact that a couple of years ago, Jesse Thorn sort of revealed for, for lack of better word, he sort of said on, on one of his other podcasts that his oldest child is gender nonconforming. And it's something that he named it because he talks about his kids on his podcast and he wanted people to understand why he would now be talking about his daughter. And since then he has spoken out very actively and very regularly about having a gender nonconforming child and about you know, the importance of confirming the genders that your children tell you are theirs, and has taken a lot of public flack because hateful, transphobic people claim that allowing your child to affirm their gender is abusive. But I do think that there is a way in which he has become sort of a person who is publicly an ally for the queer and trans communities, I think that sort of invited more people to feel comfortable applying to be on the Judge John Hodgman podcast. And there was something about— this most recent episode was a live episode and there was this moment when, you know, towards the end, Hodgman was about to give his verdict and he was talking the, it was a couple and the dispute was about astrology and it was that one of them was technically, you know, according to actual astrology, a Taurus, but identified as an Aquarius and just wanted to call herself an Aquarius. And her girlfriend was like, "no, you can't just make up your sign." But during the verdict, Hodgman was asking one member of the couple about her gender identity, which had become a sort of important part of the conversation, and it was just this moment in which he, he asked so cautiously and so gently and so humbly how she identified. And it's nothing like it's such, it's such a small act, and it is an that so many of us perform all the time, and I'm so hesitant to like give middle-age cis het white men ally cookies for, for basic decent behavior. But to be a public figure with a significant following, and to be a public figure who has literally every form of privilege attached to you, and to use that platform to model what it looks like to just constantly be learning and

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constantly be opening yourself up in very, very gentle and careful ways, it was so touching to me in that moment in the midst of ongoing and horrific news about male violence that I just started to cry while I listen to it. And that is for me, the sort of the thing about these figures, about Mr. Rogers. I haven't seen the new Mr. Rogers documentary yet, but everybody has been saying that it's absolutely beautiful and absolutely another one of these really comforting reinforcements of of what tender masculinity can do for us. And I think in a world where it feels sort of natural to be a little afraid of men or a lot afraid of men, it is comforting and heartening to have in popular culture these images of other possibilities, of other ways that masculinity might look, of other things that masculinity might be. I could go on with examples of beloved soft bois probably for hours. In the top 10 list is absolutely that final scene in Moonlight when Chiron re-encounters Kevin as an adult and he strokes his hair and we all just weep openly, as well as profoundly soft boi Samwise Gamgee. Testimony to masculine and friendship and all of the tenderness inherent in it. And of course the soft boi that I love the very, very most, which is my very soft and very good cat. I know he's not a popular culture figure, but he's on my Instagram feed fairly regularly. So there you go. I would love to hear from you about your favorite pop culture soft bois, your favorite representations of tender masculinity, and books and movies and TV and podcasts, or you know, you can just send me more pictures of you hugging your cat. All right. You know who else really loves a soft boi? Kaarina does. So let's go talk to her. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Kaarina:

Hello and welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self Care Corner. I'm going to talk about makeup as a form of self care, if that's what you want it to be. Three or four years ago I would see these people with amazing eyeliner, you know, like, it's just like really even and really sharp, and I would ask them how they did their eyeliner so well and they will inevitably reply like, "oh, it takes a lot of practice." And I would like roll my eyes because I didn't actually believe them because I've tried to do my eyeliner a couple times and it sucked. So I totally did not process the word "practice" used in this context. As many of us I think often do, I was like, "I'm not good at this right away. Well there's something wrong." But last month I was out in public with friends and someone asked me how I did my eyeliner so well and I was like, "oh, well it just takes practice." And they kind of rolled their eyes at me, so the tables have turned. I'm pretty good at eyeliner now. I have a huge collection of lipstick. I'm learning about foundation. I'm struggling with eyeshadow. And makeup unexpectedly has become a part of my daily life, and that's kind of weird because I didn't grow up with makeup. I was talking to my beautiful friend Shannon and about this and we're saying that neither of us really grew up with makeup and there are people who definitely do, you know. If your caregiver or parent mother does their makeup everyday or regularly, then you're exposed to that kind of routine, or that expectation. And maybe you have somebody who teaches you how to do makeup young or people who put the expectation on you that you need to do makeup everyday or regularly. There's definitely a kind of like, training into makeup, socializing around makeup and pressure to do makeup, but as somebody who did not experience those pressures and did not receive that training, have come to

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makeup by my own choice. Come to makeup as a source of pleasure, but also as a site of control and care. So when I was actually thinking about how I got so good at my eyeliner, I realized it happened when I was depressed, and I couldn't bring myself to do a lot with my day and I didn't have confidence in myself and my capabilities, but I could spend some time in front of the mirror on this very small detail, and I could do it again and again until I got it right, and then I could feel a little more together, or have something on my person that might distract from my emotional and mental state. So eyeliner became a way of coping, a distraction, maybe. Something to pour my agitation into. Not always good, not always bad, but something. And now that my mental health is more steady, now that I have a lot of different treatment options on the go, makeup is just a source of pleasure for me. So the last couple of months I tried doing skeleton makeup, which is the trademark look of my roller derby team. Didn't go great, didn't like it. And then I came up with my own makeup, look to go with my derby name, and I practiced it and I did it really well, and I made notes about what to change for next bout, and that made me really happy. And I'm not really sure what this has to do with you, listener. I guess no one should ever have to wear makeup. I'm sorry if you felt like you had to, but it can be a site of pleasure, and control, and play, and camaraderie. And if amazing makeup is something that you covet, then it's a worthwhile activity. An endorse it. Bye. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Hannah (Host): 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. Why don't you use that to tweet about your favorite soft boys? Of course, don't forget to rate and review the show especially on Apple podcasts. That makes a huge difference in terms of other people finding it. 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. Secret Feminist Agenda is recorded on the traditional and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, 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]