History is Gay Podcast
Episode 23: Bury the Hays Code

Gretchen: Hello and welcome to History is Gay, a podcast that examines the underappreciated and overlooked queer ladies, gents, and gentle-enbies that have always been there in the unexplored corners of history, because history has never been as straight as you think.

♪ Intro Music ♪

Introduction

My name is Gretchen.

Leigh: And I'm Leigh.

Morgan: And I'm Morgan.

Leigh: Hey, we've got a new-- that's a new voice.

Gretchen: Yeah! We have a special guest. Not just a special guest. We have a special room full of guests today.

Leigh: Yeah, yeah, we are live at our second TGI Femslash con. Everybody say: Hi! [Crowd clapping and making noise]

Gretchen: For those of you who may not aware this is the con where History is Gay was born. [Crowd enthusiasm] Yes. Yeah, we were birthed at this con--

Leigh: [Laughing] Birthed from the party room late at night. [Crowd laughs] Like: Hey! Do you wanna do this thing?

Gretchen: It's like two in the morning.

Leigh: Two in the morning. [Drunk voice] I do like history me like be gay. I'll do this thing with you. [Crowd laughs]

Gretchen: Oh, man. Yeah. We do words. We're great at words.

Leigh: We love words. Y'all—We were in the party rooms last night. We didn't get a lot of sleep. I didn't get a lot of sleep.

Gretchen: It's fine. It's fine. So today's episode, we are going to be talking about queer censorship and lesbian pulp fiction in the 50s.

Leigh: And we figured what better thing to do, then to bring conversation to all these lovely people, who are here to talk about gays in media, to talk about the actual like, history of gays. In media. [**Gretchen:** snickering] [crowd laughs] Wow, it only took us two years to do. [all laughing]

Morgan: Spoiler alert. Sometimes not fun.

Leigh: Sometimes not fun. Sometimes fun covers though. Good stuff. Yeah. Delicious. Lovely. Patricia Highsmith. Fun stuff.

Gretchen: [Makes 'yum' noises] Hey, y'all know our aesthetic. [Leigh and crowd laugh]

Leigh: So this is going to be a little bit of a different style of episode since we have a very abbreviated time. So we're gonna be doing a little thing– we're gonna have it be each one of us is going to lead like a 15 minute, kind of topic burst.

We're gonna start off talking about the Hays Code, which is the set of morality code, you know, [mocking] guidelines that were like: Hey, y'all, this is how you can and can't do any sort of representation of queerness—in media.

And then we're going to talk about lesbian pulp novels, and where that kind of evolved into and we're gonna go into one specific novelist that if you're a fan of *Carol*, you may have been familiar with. Good old Patricia Highsmith--

Gretchen: The author of *The Price of Salt*; where *Carol* comes from.

Morgan: The original.

The Hays Code

Gretchen: Yeah. So yeah, Morgan! Morgan, why don't you tell us about the Hays Code?

Morgan: Sure! I would love to tell you about the Hays Code. It's [sacrastically] great. [crowd laughs]

Gretchen: That's ironic laughter.

Morgan: Yes! So pre-Hays Code—because film has been around for a lot longer than censorship or well... Censorship has been around longer than film. But there wasn't always censorship in film. There wasn't always rating systems like we have now.

So censorship in film didn't actually start with the Hays Code. It became popular in the early 1900s. So film starts being a marketable, sellable thing in the late 1800s. And then we move into the 1900s. And once it's being shown in theaters across the United States, once it becomes more and more popular, of course, people are like: Alright, we have to figure out what's cool, and what's not cool for people to look at. [snickering] Yeah. We, a group of five people, need to decide what's appropriate for [sarcastically] everyone else.

Audience Member: I'm sure they're very diverse too.

Morgan: Yeah, especially in the early 1900s. [crowd laughing] So, and part of that was—is that films were being consumed by a growing immigrant population in the United States. And so of course, people were like: Well, we need to make sure that these people that are coming from somewhere else, have a specific idea of what the United States is about. And that includes no racy stuff. [crowd laughter]

And this kind of led to a bunch of censorship groups in different cities. Each city would have its review board that would view the films before they were sent to theaters and would determine, "Okay, this is totally cool," or, "absolutely not, no way."

Criticism usually centered on four areas: The effects on children– so the, you

know, [mocking] "think of the children" kind of thing that gets said over and over again–

Gretchen: Literal pearl clutching.

Morgan: Right?

Gretchen: Yeah. Because at the time they would have been wearing them. [Laughter]

Morgan: So the concern is always “What's going to mess up children?” Which, I mean, is a valid concern. But it's kind of a false wall for, “We don't want these things to be shown, and so we're going to kind of scapegoat children, and be like, we don't want children to see this.” Potential health problems, negative influences on morals and manners– This was when manners were a big deal and etiquette and all that– and then a lack of role of education and religion, in film development.

A lack of religion becomes significant down the line when we talk about the Hays Code and censorship. And this wasn't, this is kind of a bipartisan deal. Conservatives and progressives were really on the review board, the censorship train. Conservatives were concerned with films being a threat to authority and social structures in the United States. And then progressives saw them as a distraction from social organizations and progression in the US. So yeah, a lot of cities had review boards, even in the early 1900s.

In 1907, the Chicago police were able to review films, and were able to give licenses to filmmakers or to theaters to show films. So it even went all the way up to government structures in different cities. So it wasn't, just a handful of people watching movies and deciding it; it was kind of a government deal.

So by 1920, more than 90 cities had some kind of review board. And then by 1923, 22 states had review boards for films. With review boards and with censorship…and you see this kind of happen across the board… Throughout history, when we talk about censorship, a lot of it has to do with social issues and what's going on in the time to determine what's going to be acceptable in media content.

And in the early 1900s... I mean, this is kind of an always; but especially in the early 1900s a big concern was race relations in the United States. So there was a heavyweight boxer, Jack Johnson, who won the heavyweight title in I believe, 1908. Yeah, 1908. And that was filmed because they filmed boxing matches at the time. And he beat... He was a Black man, and he beat a white boxer. And that was filmed and then distributed. And people were not happy about it. And by people, I mean, white people. [Crowd laughs] White people are not thrilled that this guy did this. And then they're extra not happy that this was filmed and then distributed for other people to see. So they stopped allowing boxing films to be transferred over state lines. You couldn't distribute a boxing film over state lines, and that was because of this one fight that happened.

And we kind of think of most media as free speech. First amendment stuff like: the government can't stop us from creating films or whatever. But in the early days, there was actually a Supreme Court ruling that said that films were not speech, but "a business pure and simple" and, merely a spectacle for entertainment with "a special capacity for evil" [Snickering and crowd laughter] Which basically meant that the government could do whatever they wanted, and could put laws on distributing films or where they could be--

Gretchen: Which is ironic, because now businesses are speech.

Morgan: Right.

Gretchen: Yeah. Businesses are people who can express freedom of speech. Back then, being a business was like: No, you can't say what you want. [Crowd laughing]

Morgan: Yeah, a lot of small stuff happens in 100 years. [Bursts into laughter]

Morgan: Things uh, things change. And you forget that this used to be the way that things were. Even though there were censorship boards all across the country, this didn't stop filmmakers at all. They still made wherever they wanted pretty much. And they did it a lot of times to see what they could get away with.

So they would do whatever, have violence or sex or whatever in their films,

and then they would send them to the review boards to see if they would get passed. Because if they did, then they could talk to each other and be like, "Okay, so we can show like a half of a boob. [Crowd laughs] And they won't flag it." As long at it's tasteful --

Leigh: Tasteful side boob. [Crowd laughs]

Morgan: Yes. As long as the nipples are not female presenting-- [Crowd laughs] As long as they're not female presenting, yeah, the review boards of the early 1900s and film is basically like the new Tumblr [Crowd laughs] We can't. We can't see this.

Leigh: That's what I said. That's why I keep seeing so many nipples with mustaches everywhere, right? [Crowd laughs] Like in old films like, black and white film, right?

Together: Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Gretchen: Gotta have the male presenting boob.

Leigh: Where am I getting my movies?

Morgan: I don't. the back part of the--

Leigh: Yeah I guess the back part of the movie store. Yeah.

Morgan: So there was a period of time in the early 30s right before the Hays Code was put into function– or into the film industry, where you had these films that were just very frank about what was going on in the United States; because this is depression era time. So there were a lot of films that talked about how rough it was to live in a country that was failing pretty significantly, economically. There's a lot of social change happening. And so you had a lot of really good films that were just honest, but the government didn't like that.

So you move into a time period where, it's the roaring 20s into the 30s. So prohibition is happening. There's a lot of change in terms of relationships, how people are viewing sex, how people are viewing casual sex. And so the government or other officials, a lot of them being religious officials, were

highly concerned about what kind of moral material was being broadcast out into the country. And at this time, we start seeing Hollywood turn into kind of the star producing machine that it's kind of now known for; which came with, of course, its own set of scandals.

So Mary Pickford got divorced, and then quickly remarried. There was the murder of a rumored-to-be bisexual director William Desmond Taylor. And that was never solved. Comedian 'Fatty' Arbuckle was charged for a murder of a rising film star at this wild illegal party in a hotel room in San Francisco. So even the image of Hollywood wasn't moral. And so the government was like, "you all have to get it together, or we're gonna do it." [Laughter] And the film industry was like, "we don't want that. At all."

So in response to all this, and to keep the government from getting involved, a bunch of directors and other people in the film industry created the MPPDA, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. They love these long acronyms. And they hired Will Hays to head the MPPDA. He was a previous Republican National Committee Chair, and he was the campaign manager for Warren G. Harding. So he was basically the PR man, he was just trying to rehabilitate Hollywood's image, make sure that the government doesn't get involved. All that good stuff. So he and the board created the Hays Code in 1927. It was not popular at first. And also it was really hard to enforce. There was no way to enforce it. And so basically, the filmmakers looked at the Hays Code and were like: Okay. And then threw it away. [Leigh laughing]

So what it was, was a list of 11 Don'ts and 25 Be-Carefuls. So the Don'ts were like: You absolutely cannot have these 11 things in films. And then 25 Be-Carefuls were: you can have them but they need to be part of the plot in some significant way that's not scandalous or shameless or whatever. And part of the Don'ts included things like profanity, nudity, really, sex in general. They were not into people having sex in films. This is the start.

People like to talk about how on *I Love Lucy*, Lucy and Ricky didn't sleep in the same bed. That's because of the Hays Code. In a moment I will talk about TV a little bit. The no drugs, and what's important for this podcast, no depictions of sexual perversion. They meant gays. No gay shit. [Crowd laughing] Basically cut out the gay shit. And then Be Carefuls were for crime, use of guns, stuff like that kind of kind of branched off of these bigger

things_-

Gretchen: Lustful kissing?

Morgan: Yeah–

Gretchen: My favorite is lustful kissing.

Morgan: Yeah, I love that too. When I do this lecture with my students, I tell them that part of it is "lustful kissing". They're like, "What the fuck is that?" [Crowd laughs]

Gretchen: Explains why when you watch all those old timey movies and I'm like, this is not erot– They're just like smushing their faces --

Leigh: If you're lying back and thinking of England it's fine. [Crowd laughs]

Morgan: Pretty much!

Gretchen: [Crowd laughing] Dont – if you want it.-- You can't show having any kind of desire involved.

Morgan: Right. Yeah. You know, sex for procreation was the big --

Leigh: [Laughs] Yeah, everybody wants to watch that on TV. [Crowd laughs]

Morgan: Yeah. Love that.

So basically, the first principle of the code is, quote, "No picture shall be produced, which will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence, the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil, or sin. Sin being the important part here. This was pretty much ignored until 1934, when the Catholic Legion of Decency threatened to boycott films. And then everybody was like: [facetious] Ah, we can't get rid of that sweet, sweet Catholic money. [Crowd laughs] And it was a big enough group of people that they were like: Ah, can't do it. So they threaten to boycott the films and the code was put into mass use at that point. Hays and the MPPDA created the PCA, the Production Code Administration, which was headed by a Catholic layman Joseph Breen.

So the Breen Era of the code is talked about a lot when you reference the Hays Code, because he actually got it enforced. He was the one that actually got the job done in terms of the Hays Code. Each film had to have a stamp of approval. There was a shot, you know, how you see the MGM lion at the beginning of a ton of films, similar to that–you would see a stamp of approval by this office. And they have carte blanche to do whatever they wanted. They would look at scripts, and they would also look at the films and they were able to just remove anything that they saw that they could argue fit under this kind of parameter of: No… no fun stuff. [Crowd laughs] Really. No fun shit.

So what is this mean for queer folks? Uh. Bad. [Crowd laughs] It's bad. To be kind of light on it.

So sex perversion is basically code for homosexuality. You're trying to create a code where you want to scrub out the things you don't want to see in your society. If you're a homophobic society, you're probably gonna try and scrub out homosexuality in films or queerness. You couldn't show anything. Or it had to be so subtextual and hidden that the straights wouldn't see it.

But this also kind of worked in a negative way in that a lot of villains were queer coded at this point. So if you've ever seen *The Maltese Falcon*, the villain in *The Maltese Falcon* is heavily queer coded, and there are gay characters in *The Maltese Falcon* [novel], but they aren't vilified as much as as in the film.

Leigh: So also never being able to have a happy ending. If you were going to show characters that were queer, and not villains, there needed to be a return to home - return to heterosexuality, or some sort of punishment there. You could show it, you could show queerness. But you couldn't encourage it or validate it.

Morgan: Right. Yeah. So they, yeah, they either had to die, or they were the villain. The code did eventually fail for a couple of reasons. The first being that films ended up being covered under the First Amendment, there's a different Supreme Court case and so that changed. The film industry wasn't worried about the government doing anything anymore, because they didn't really have any power to; because, the government, told, the government,

that it couldn't do anything. [Crowd laughs]

Morgan: There were some films that the directors were like, "Fuck you guys" and just made the film anyway and released it without the seal. Without the approval of the committee. And they were wildly popular.

Gretchen: [Dryly] Gee. I wonder why? [Crowd laughs]

Morgan: Right. So--

Leigh: Want the good stuff? Stamp.

Morgan: Yeah. So the office was seeing that this is not sustainable anymore, people are gonna go see these films. Theaters had the ability to show kind of whatever they wanted. But for credibility reasons, they tended to show films that have the stamp, but some of them didn't. And those films were really, really popular.

But one of the biggest things, and I say this, over and over again to my students is that television changed the game for media, so hard. Nothing really had that kind of impact again until the internet. Television was so popular in the United States when it became feasible for a larger audience to purchase-- films had to do something to get people to come back to the theater, because you could just sit in your home with your TV dinner and with your family and not have to go anywhere and watch *Howdy Doody* or something instead of going to the movies. So they decided to scrap the code. But then television had codes.

Morgan: So by the 1960s, the TV code became a thing and it's almost exactly the same as the Hays Code. So I'm not going to repeat that whole thing. But there was a lot of concern about, of course, the children. Because if you could plop your kid down in front of a TV and have them watch, whatever, you're gonna probably be concerned, maybe, with [laughs] what that kid's watching. I don't know, I was left unsupervised to watch a lot of television. And I turned out reasonably Okay, so--

Leigh: I mean, you're here.

Morgan: Right. I'm here. Yeah, so everything worked out just the way it

was supposed to. So yeah, it was not great for queer folks in terms of television either. A lot of it was you couldn't show it. It was worded differently in the television codes than in the Hays Code. Basically, it was no illicit sex, but the meaning was kind of the same. So a lot of the first queer characters that are explicit; where it says in the narrative on the episode that they're gay, they usually die, or they're the villain. *Autostraddle* has a really good article about the first couple queer female characters on television.

Gretchen: We'll put that in our show notes.
[*Autostraddle's Ultimate Infographic Guide to Dead Lesbian Characters on TV* https://www.autostraddle.com/autostraddles-ultimate-infographic-guide-to-dead-lesbian-tv-characters-332920/]

Morgan: All of them either die, or they're the villain, or something else ludicrous. But they never are happy. And they never...being gay is clearly shown as not a good thing.

So the television code ended in the 80s, the early 80s. It didn't last super long. But it still had a lasting impact, just like the Hays Code did. I mean, the core when we talk about the Hays Code, the television codes is that it heavily heavily impacted how queer people are shown in media, how they're shown in films, how they're shown on television. I mean, not to like, raise a ghost, but Lexa [from *The 100*]. What happened to Lexa [Crowd laughs] is you can trace that back to good old Will Hays, and probably even farther, which, which Leigh will talk about, probably could go back even farther with that.

I try, when I talk about reputation representation in class, I try to end on a high note. Because it can be a real downer. And the thing is that we have a lot of good stuff now. Things are getting better. We're getting more queer folks into television and into the film industry. We're seeing things like *One Day at a Time* and *Pose* and all these really good shows that portray queerness in a positive way. So it's not all sad. For better or for worse, we're getting an *L Word* reboot, like-- [Crowd laughs] Um, so yeah, it's getting better. But yeah, there we go... So that's my little--

Gretchen: Yeah. Thank you.

Leigh Thank you so much for joining us, Morgan.

Morgan: Yeah, thank you!--

Leigh: For teaching us all about the Hays Code

Gretchen: Yeah!

[Crowd clapping]

Leigh: Yeah! Part of the reason why cons like this exist is having those kinds of discussions about these sort of things like the morality codes. And it's so funny, talking about this, you also think about the Hays Code, and the television codes were not the only things in effect. They did not only bring these restrictions to visual mediums, you also saw it in the written medium. So there's the Comics Code Authority, if any of y'all are comics fans, and this also extended out into the publishing world, which I want to talk about a little bit.

So the influence of the Hays Code and other morality codes meant that we not only saw these rules, in the film and television, but the publishing world really was beholden to them, as well. Because if you represented the sort of things that were illicit, it could greatly diminish your ability to distribute the books. So a lot of authors were actually forced into doing the same kind of things.

I want to talk about in the 1950s and 1960s. Even before really, we had film and television really becoming the zeitgeist, is a lot of folks in the LGBTQ community found any sort of representation that could get their hands on, was in the form of lesbian pulp paperback novels.

These "pulp" novels were original paperback novels, so they were never published with a cloth cover first. They were published originally in paperback. And they usually were having scandalous, sexualized, melodramatic covers, and they were part of a larger genre, but the lesbian romance subsection was one of the highest selling parts of the market.

You've probably seen some of these before. They have scantily clad women in negligees on the covers and they've wild taglines like... This is from Sheldon Lord's *The Third Way*. "Kate Bellosa and Liz Bellows had designs on their employer-- and also on each other. [Dramatic voice] Because they were more

than ambitious. They were driven by twisted desires!" [Crowd laughs] Or--

Gretchen: Is this fanfic? Is this like [unintelligible] [Crowd laughs]

Leigh: Right? I mean, it's literally-- Let me tell you, [dramatically] and Bannon's *Odd Girl Out* "A confession of a shocking and forbidden love". Or my favorite from *Twilight Girl*. "Lorraine was 'different'--but was she bad? The savage story of a pretty teen-ager enticed into forbidden practices by older girls!" [Crowd laughs] ...I say, directly after people got out of a "Dark Waters" panel.

So yeah, so originally, these books were created out of voyeuristic intent. They were meant to appeal to, unsurprisingly, heterosexual male audiences. And so it has ties to somewhat pornographic history. But what's really interesting about this, is that what came out of it was an entire generation of women who came to their lesbian or bisexual identity by way of these novels. This was a way that they could walk into a drugstore, walk up to a newsstand and find something that reflected something of themselves and their experiences, no matter the homophobic context around it.

And that's a conversation that I really want to get into. It raises the question: Is any representation... Is this representation that we were seeing from the Hays Code, and from these other morality codes, this question of, well, they have to die at the end, or they have to do xy and z. Is that better than nothing at all? Does it at least give reprieve?

A lot of what I found in my research is that this was profoundly important to creating the very sense of a lesbian print culture and a lesbian identity in the 1950s and 1960s. So some scholars on lesbian pulp novels had some reallywonderful quotes that I want to read out. So Lee Lynch, who wrote a book called *Cruising the Libraries*, said

> *At last, lesbians! . . . I read every one of these mass-market paperbacks I could get my hands on. . . . I was driven, searching for my nourishment like a starveling, grabbing at any crumb that looked, tasted, or smelled digestible.*

I think we can all relate to that, right? We try to find anything we can, or Donna Allegra from *Between the Sheets*

> *No matter how embarrassed and ashamed I felt when I went to the cash register to buy these books [lesbian pulps], it was absolutely necessary for me to have them. I needed them the way I needed food and shelter for survival.*

So just take that in. We all know what it feels like to see ourselves represented and feel like you've gotten something that you've needed for so long, right?

Gretchen: And just a tiny little note. I think, as we talked about language here, I just want to say for all of our listeners; when we say "lesbian" this is labeled lesbian. But in this context, we're using it inclusively for all queer female experience. So this would include bisexual women, or pansexual women or other multi gender attracted, women, and this is you know, so just so…

Leigh: It's just the language at the time.

Gretchen: This was the language at the time using to describe it was lesbian. So just wanted to be clear for our listeners that we're not using lesbian in an exclusive context here.

Leigh: Right! Yeah. So what's interesting about these books is that because they were not in the high art kind of area, that they were kind of lowbrow, a lot of scholars tend to ignore these. And also because of their homophobic characteristics. But as the quotes that we just mentioned attest. these non literary, often homophobic books mattered intensely to some women. So a lot of scholars will call these you know, just survival literature.

So I'm going to go a little bit into the history of them. So the golden age of what we call the "lesbian pulps" is generally considered to be 1950 to 1965. You had a period between 1928, which is when the publication of *The Well of Loneliness* happened, by Radclyffe Hall, in the 1920s, and 1930s. And then the 70s, where you had this wave of lesbian, bisexual feminist publishing. There was a period of time where there wasn't a huge amount until 1950, where we had these mass market paperbacks with explicitly lesbian themes and sensationalized covers that had millions in sales. These things were ev-ery-where.

In the 1950s, it was a time when most women loving women, men loving men, couldn't access any stories about themselves, much less positive ones. And yet, though many pulps were survival literature; forced into the depressing endings and restrictions by these publishers, they were also able to connect people with stories that were reflective. And also because these were lowbrow pulp paperbacks, they weren't as closely scrutinized as television and high literature. So authors could often get away with things that normally wouldn't get past the censor so much - like Morgan was talking about: with, "well the code's there, but I'm gonna do whatever I want anyway." So it opened the door to unregulated consumption of literary materials. People would be getting these in the mail as well.

So the first lesbian pulp novel that started the genre is generally considered to begin with Tereska Torrès' novel *Women in Barracks* in 1950, which is a semi-autobiographical account of when she joined the Free French Army in 1939. She was in the resistance movement, and the cover has a bunch of straight-- She's a straight French woman and watching a bunch of these lesbians in the Free French Army.

And it's like... It actually has one fully dressed woman on the cover and then a couple of women and negligees looking away at each other and towards each other. [Crowd laughs] And it was huge. It sold like over 2.5 million copies. And it started this huge boom of publishing. And suddenly Fawcett publishing the group that was doing [under the line Gold Medal Books], wanted more. So they got a woman who was writing under the pseudonym Vin Packer to write *Spring Fire*, which was also extremely successful. This was in 1952. And that caused multiple other publishers to begin publishing in the genre.

What's really interesting about this is that Tereska Torrès started it, but then you had a whole bunch of other women writers coming in who were actually lesbians writing in this genre and trying to take it in a different direction. So Vin Packer is the pseudonym of Marijane Meaker, who's now a children's book author. And her Wikipedia article is really great. It's got a picture of her with a cat. [Crowd laughs] I love it.

So a lot of these books... One of the scholars actually divides lesbian pulp genre into subsets, the two largest being: "pro-lesbian" and "virile

adventures”.

Later on in the time that lesbian pulp novels were being published, it was dominated by men. It was dominated by men writing about women and it was very titillating and borderline pornographic. But then you had this group of women that were sort of a “industry within an industry”, lesbian pulps being written by women trying to flip the script. So between 1952 and 1957, publishers were mostly interested in those virile adventures that were focusing on the bottom line and it was like: Oh, hey. Lesbianism sells. Let's just put as much illicitness in there as we can; which actually allowed another wave of pro-lesbian books to emerge with authors like Ann Bannon and Valerie Taylor.

These were women who had seen how homophobic the genre had expanded to and wanted to fight back from within. So one of these women ended up saying that they began to write against the genre’s norms. I really loved Valerie Taylor’s quote, which was:

> *I began writing gay novels around 1957. There was suddenly a plethora of them on sale in drugstores and bookstores... many written by men who had never knowingly spoken to a lesbian. Wish fulfillment stuff, pure erotic daydreaming. I wanted to make some money, of course, but I also thought that we should have some stories about real people.*

So a lot of the books feature lesbian or bisexual women trying to tell stories and even though they were melodramatic, even though they ended in these terrible endings, they were trying to tell some sort of truth.

A lot of times what was on the covers and these sensationalist things didn't actually end up matching up with what was actually in the books. There are actually a couple of books that you did actually get a couple of happy endings.

Gretchen: One of which we'll talk about.

Leigh: We don't have a huge amount of time to go as much as we wanted to into here. But what I wanted to kind of end on here is why did people... Why are these books with homophobic negative energy so beloved, by women? Why did so many bisexual and lesbian women flock to books like *Spring Fire*

and write fan mail to Packer thanking her for representation and go on to prop up an entire sub genre. It was the only... One of the only things you've had. And a lot of the times, like we see now, representation that has... If we see the “Bury Your Gays” trope now it's very, very different than if you were to see it in the 1950s. It's what you could get. And so I really liked this quote that says

> *In the context of the mid 20th century, when homosexuality was still classified as a mental illness and seen as social aberration, seemingly negative lesbian representation* being written *by a lesbian became a cultural refuge for lesbians living in a time when they were surrounded by the idea that their very existence was wrong. And it did that for several reasons, the chief of which being that lesbian readers understood what pulp was and what the cultural climate was. They knew the marketing was a product of the times and that the ending was nonsense. As Packer said, “Lesbian readers were able to look past the cover: to find themselves between the pages, we always found ourselves.”*

You don't tend to see a lot after 1965 mostly because porn. [Crowd laughs] Like for serious, the rise in explicit pornography grew. And so a lot of the mainstream publishing houses were straying away from these kind of things because smaller presses were popping up with just straight up, labeled for men, adults books, and yeah.

So I just wanted to end on one little thing, and then we'll, we'll pop into Patricia Highsmith.

What is the quote from Katherine Forrest, who was one of our sources, says

> *The importance of all of our pulp fiction novels cannot possibly be overstated. Whatever their negative images or messages, they told us we were not alone, because they told us about each other.They led us to look for and find each other. They led us to the end of the isolation that had divided and conquered us. And once we began to question the judgments made of us our civil rights movement was born. The courage of these authors also cannot be overstated: pseudonyms be damned. The writers of these books laid bare an intimate, hidden part of themselves and they did it under siege in the dark depths of a more*

than metaphorical war time, because there was desperate urgency inside themselves to reach out to put words on the page for women like themselves to read.

[Crowd snaps fingers]

Leigh: There you go.

Gretchen: So speaking of women doing just that, we're going to zoom through Patricia Highsmith. I'm going to basically cut most of her biography and just talk about that good gay shit because that's what we're here for - the good gay shit.

Patricia Highsmith. She is a writer known for her psychological thrillers. If you know of *Strangers on a Train*, if you know of *John Ripley*, any of those books. She wrote them. But she wrote one very queer, very gay book called T*he Price of Salt*, which many of you may know by the film adaptation starring Cate Blanchett called *Carol*. So it was written in 1952.

I'm going to zoom ahead. Well, before actually before I get into that, we will just say Patricia Highsmith was a fairly private person about her own life, but she was still fairly open about being a lesbian. She never hid the fact that she was a lesbian. She had relationships with lots of women. She was the kind of person who did not have very long relationships with women. She actually didn't really like women a whole lot, but she likes having sex with women. [Crowd laughs]

She... One of the funny tiny tidbits about her life is she'll talk about how she tried really hard to like men because she preferred their company, but just could never be attracted to a man. So she had these series of really intense relationships that will last like one or two years, and then she'd be like, "I can't do this anymore. This is a lot of commitment. And I can do it" and then... But she was very much a lesbian and very open about it.

So even as she was writing these more mainstream thrillers that didn't feature queer characters; that was her story. A lot of her male characters are actually just versions of herself. So even if you read her characters, and there's a heterosexual relationship, chances are that there's actually a queer layer underneath it, because she's writing herself as a man in these

relationships with women.

The one explicit one that she wrote was *The Price of Salt*. It was written under the pseudonym Claire Morgan. Hey, Morgan! So, the events that inspired the book ran thus: one day a woman in a mink coat drifted by the toy department. Highsmith had found a job working at a toy department during the Christmas season. Just to have some more money. Highsmith later recalled: "Perhaps I noticed her because she was alone, or because a mink coat was a rarity, and because she was blondish and seemed to give off light." Like Alfred Hitchcock, Highsmith was captivated by frosty blondes, all the more so if they were married and rich. [Crowd laughs] The shopper who slapped her gloves into one hand as she scanned the merchandise made Highsmith feel "odd and swimmy in the head, near to fainting, yet at the same time uplifted" [Crowd laughs] With an abstracted air, the woman Mrs. E. R. Senn bought a doll from Highsmith.

The Price of Salt as a semi-autobiographical. So if you have seen *Carol*, you know what this is about. [Crowd laughs] Cate Blanchett is embodying this real person that interacted with Highsmith. So that very night Highsmith sat down and wrote an eight page outline for the novel, which was the story of a 19 year old Therese who falls in love with a wealthy suburban wife and mother in her 30s. Highsmith did have a type and her type was, wealthy upper class socialite cool blondes. That was her thing.

Leigh: Relatable. [Gretchen and crowd laugh]

Gretchen: Same.

Leigh: Like most people at this con.

Gretchen: Right. So when you read it Therese's first sight of Carol in the novel you can't help but think of Patricia catching sight of Mrs. E. R. Senn that day.

> *I see her the same instant she sees me, and instantly, I love her. Instantly, I am terrified, because I know she knows I am terrified and that I love her. Though there are seven girls between us, I know, she knows, she will come to me and have me wait on her.*

[Crowd laughs]

Leigh:
Seven girls between us, huh? [Crowd laughs]

Gretchen:
I mean, if you're into that kind of thing. [Crowd laughs] Yeah. Polyamory for everyone. [Leigh laughs]

The other real life event that seemed to have inspired *Carol* is Highsmith had an affair with a woman whose last name was Catherwood. It seemed to have inspired especially certain elements in the story including Carol's husband hiring a private detective to investigate them. Catherwood actually lost custody of her daughter due to an affair she had with a woman, which is an element of the story in *The Price of Salt*, that Carol is afraid that she will lose custody of her daughter.

Again, super short on time, but I will say one of the things is when when the mass market paperback came out Claire Morgan so quote, Claire Morgan received tons of positive responses from female readers, including quotes like "Yours is the first book like this with a happy ending!". ["Mm" from Leigh] And another was "Thank you for writing such a story. It is a little like my own story…"

One thing that sets Patricia Highsmith apart from a lot of the lesbian pulp fiction was *The Price of Salt* ended with a happy ending, in a way that most of the other lesbian pulp fiction at the time did not. That made it both very... It was a very brave thing for her to do. As Leigh's quote said, though, they were writing under... she was writing under a pseudonym. It still took a lot of courage in that time period in 1952, to write a lesbian story with a happy ending and publish it. Because at any point she could have been found out. Highsmith was actually fairly ambivalent about the novel, mostly because she was afraid of how it would be received, particularly by her grandmother. So she actually publicly dodged any connection with the book for a very, very long time, even though I mean, she had every right to be proud of the story.

What is really lovely is that with *Carol*, those of us within the community get to in a sense, celebrate Patricia Highsmith in a way she was never able to celebrate herself. We get to have that experience of celebrating her in a way

she couldn't. And knowing all of this context, talking about the Hays Code, lesbian pulp fiction, we can have a much even deeper appreciation for what *Carol* is. And for that story and how beautiful and powerful and necessary that story was, at the time to have queer female representation that was positive. And so yeah…

We're very close on time. We have another panel coming in. We could keep talking, [Leigh laughing] you know us, you know *History is Gay* we could talk for another hour. We're gonna have to draw things to a close.

Very quickly, Morgan, if you want to tell us where people can find you online.

Morgan: Sure. You can find me on Twitter @mcclapp. And if you want to contact me through email, because the only social media I really have for people to get hold of me is Twitter, but if you want to contact me through my email, my email is mclapp1@gsu.edu

Gretchen: And Leigh, where can people find you online?

Leigh: People can find me online @aparadoxinflux on Twitter. And at this con for the rest of the weekend.

Gretchen: Yeah! Whoo! And I'm Gretchen. You can find me on Twitter as @gnelliswriter

And again, yeah, we'll be here for the rest of the con hanging out talking about that that good old gay shit. And did you know-- Did you know History is Gay? History IS Gay. History is really gay.

Leigh: History is Gay Podcast can be found on Tumblr historyisgaypodcast Twitter @HistoryisGayPod. You can always drop us a line with questions, suggestions, or just to say hi at HistoryisGaypodcast@gmail.com

If you enjoy the show, and you want to support us in continuing to make it you can support us on Patreon. There's a whole bunch of goodies you've heard about him. We don't have a lot of time but check it out.

Morgan: Yeah Patreon!

Leigh: Morgan is a patron. Y'all should become patrons. We also have merch here. If you want to get stuff. Folks who are listening later can buy stuff online as usual.

And lastly, remember to rate review and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. It helps more people find the show and we can expand our awesome community.

Gretchen: And that's it for History is Gay. Until next time:

Together: Stay queer--

Crowd: And Stay Curious! [Clapping and cheering]

♪ Outro Music ♪