

## Outline:

*Opening comment from Doc*

Introduction

1. When Doc and Tanya see POC characters by white authors
2. So, does TJ do it right? (Jeremiah, Elaine, Shannon, Doc)
  - a. TJ on getting it right
  - b. Sometimes he gets it *too* right. (Doc's take on HitCS poem, Shannon's Olive Juice story, Tanya's Corey & Rico story)
3. So -- why does TJ take a risk to write these characters? Why not just stay in his lane
4. And how do the readers feel reading characters like Sam, Corey/Kori, Sal etc (Shannon, Elaine, Tanya, Jeremiah)
5. Kirt's -- who do you see when a character's race hasn't been specified
  - a. White-washing TJ characters (Shannon and Elaine)
6. Controversies -- it's, well, endless! The start of 2020 had its fair share within the romance literary world. So instead of dwelling on this, just keep it short. (Dee's take)
7. What to look forward to in the future
  - a. And while we wait for TJ's next book -- Readers should go search for more diverse reads. (Jeremiah, Shannon)

Conclusion

Podcast Ending/promo

*Closing comments -- perhaps something more "behind the scenes" -- Dee*

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## Script -- Draft

**Doc:** When it comes to the characterization of black women, I'm always nervous about seeing the word sassy.

All TJ's characters are sassy. [Include laugh]

**\*THEME MUSIC\***

**Kirt:** *Welcome to the Klunatics Podcast. I'm Kirt Graves.*

*TJ Klune has made his literary world unabashedly queer. As we discussed in the last episode, he values representation of all sexual orientations in his work, but that's not where the diversity ends.*

*Now I know what you're thinking. Oh my gods, Kirt is a cisgender white guy and he's about to tell me all about diversity in writing. Well, that's only partially true. Mostly, we're going to be hearing from TJ's readers who are not white guys, and I have to start by thanking them for being willing to discuss a difficult topic so openly and lovingly. By all rights, approaching the topic of race in literature should have been terrifying for me, but then I remembered I'm a white man in America and I have nothing to be scared of. So much privilege. But also, these wonderful people guided me through the topic in a way that I hope makes folks who look like me to see the world outside themselves a little more clearly.*

**Tanya C.:** Hi, my name is Tanya Cagnolatti. I am from Vallejo, California, which is where I'm talking to you from now.

**Kirt:** [00:07:34] Is there, like when you see that a white writer is, is, is introducing a character of color, do you usually kind of have that like moment of like, Oh no.

**Tanya C.:** [00:07:44] You know what I do

**Doc:** Hi, I'm Aysha Khoury better known as Doc Elderfall on Facebook.

**Doc:** I admit, I'm always very hesitant when I'm reading a story and I'm a character is introduced that is, um, particularly black, I identify as black. Um, because representation of us, especially in America, um, is so important, um, because we are often [00:06:00] so, um. Poorly characterized.

**Doc:** There's always that part of you that feels like you have to read with this. Um, ah, what's the word I'm looking for? Read with this lens of does this in any way [00:12:00] hurt my people, and that's something that always takes you out of the story. And as a reader, that's not what you want.

**Kirt:** Would it be fair then to say like you would rather see an absence of that than somebody doing it poorly?

**Doc:** Yes, absolutely.

**Kirt:** Neither is good, but an absence

**Doc:** Neither is good, but I'd rather just leave us alone. Just leave, leave me and my people out of it.

**Tanya C.:** [00:09:58] Yes. And I'm in total agreement with that. I know. It's not really. Possible for there to be that, you know, real life understanding. But if you're not sure, then maybe reach out to a person of color and say, Hey, I want to run this by you. You know, either the chapter, the paragraph, the book itself that you're working on. Read this and let me know what you think, you know, am I, you know, making the people of color too magical, or am I making them too angry or am I really making it all about their color and not about who they are as a person? Because end of the day. If we're going to be represented in books, which is so rare, we would just like to be represented like everybody else.

**Doc:** And I think that's something that a lot of authors don't understand when they're writing their characters. They're either this like image of the perfect minority. Or it's, it's the stereotype. And I think most of us live and breathe both.

[00:16:00] And when I say most of us, meaning, um, you know, people of color.

**Kirt:** Yeah. Well, because we are both.

**Doc:** Right? And when I, and when I say live, not necessarily live the stereotype, but you know, there are, there are truths in my life. I like fried chicken and watermelon that has nothing to do in my mind with being black.

They just taste good.

**Kirt:** Yes, I also like fried chicken and watermelon.

**Doc:** We know you like fried chicken.

**Kirt:** Setting aside awful stereotypes, how do TJ's non-white readers react to his characters of color?

**Doc:** It's a joy to have TJ write people of color, um, because he's just so incredible and making them three dimensional.

**Jeremiah:** Hi. So I'm Jeremiah and I currently live in Singapore, although I've kind of spent most of the last few years between like the UK and Australia as well for my studies.

**Kirt:** Do you think he tends to hit the mark more with his characters of color.

**Jeremiah:** [00:15:22] To be honest with you, I, I would like to say he has, cause I know he has

done the appropriate research for it. He's been very clear from the start that he's not someone from that ethnicity, uh, and in the culture, he does appropriate, the research and everything. But I think there's still, this question is probably best answered by someone from that culture he has portrayed.

[00:15:42] So for example, Corey, who is, I believe in *The Art of Breathing*, like they mention that he or she was, uh, Hispanic and black, I suppose. So I guess this question would be best answered by someone from that background, rather than me being not even American, I'm Singaporean Chinese.

[00:16:01] So there's no way I could really understand fully what it means.

**Dee:** So I'm Dee Slate. I am originally from England, but I've lived in America for 32 years now. My parents are Nigerian, so I come from three different continents.

**Dee:** [00:03:00] But when I read TJ's books and I realized that, Oh, Corey/Kori is black, but it, it's not his main focus, but it's nice to see that he's written as just any other American. To me he just seems like any other American, there's no stereotyping. He, he might say, well, we in our community do X, Y, Z, but it's not the, it's not overt.

[00:03:26] ... He doesn't co, he doesn't come across as street. He's an educated American young man. He happens to be black or he happens to be biracial. So that's one of the things I really appreciate about the way the characters are written.

[00:03:49] I don't necessarily think of them as people of color. It is nice that they are different, diverse, but. That's not the thing that strikes me, if that makes sense.

**Elaine:** Hi, I'm Elaine and

**Elaine:** [00:12:08] First of all, when you read his characters of color, they don't, they don't feel like stereotypes. They feel like real people. So they're interesting and they're unique and they've got stories and experiences that ring true. You can really tell, he's done his research. But at the same time, you can also see that being a person of color still influences them.

So take for example, Sam of Wilds who, you know, Sam is definitely not stereotypical anything. That's one reason why he's such a popular character. He's himself and there's really no one quite like him.

**Doc:** Um. But I think that's a difference in when I see TJ approach, uh, people of color, even as side characters. I think TJ always comes at his characters looking for who that character is as an individual, and not these feeling like, Oh, I need to employ diversity.

**Kirt:** I think that's incredibly profound. I've never heard it put that way before. That like, as somebody who's writing a person instead of writing a people. And wow, does that make sense.

**Kirt:** I asked TJ how he writes his characters of color. Sita, who wrote this episode, would like you to know that my question was long and rambling and didn't make a lot of sense, but luckily, as an author, TJ has a way with words. Seeing as the question doesn't appear in the episode, I'm not sure why she felt the need to put that in the script, but here we are.

**TJ:** This is my story. It has my name on it. No amount of edits, sensitivity reads, beta reads anything will, will, I can use it as, as an excuse down the road saying, Oh, well, I didn't get this right, but somebody should have caught this and, and said, that's not, that's not how it works. If I get something wrong, it's because I got it wrong and it is my fault and I have to own up to that, which is why I take such care with how I present these kinds of stories, because if I'm going to tell this kind of story, I have to get it right. I have to, because if I don't, then what the hell was the point of even telling a story like that to begin with.

**TJ:** Let's, let's use Corey/Kori as an example. Corey/Kori is bigender and biracial. I am neither, but I still wanted to tell their story.

And I had to get it right because when I write a story like that, I have to write, I'm writing about the characters and not as the characters, if that makes sense. I can't have a full understanding of what they go through because I am not them and to still tell a story involving a person of color, I have to make sure that I'm writing about them and not as them.

Does that make sense? I'm not trying to tell, I'm not trying to act as like, I know what people of color go through because that that's, that would be disingenuous. It's not something that I can actually do.

**Kirt:** And when Tj sets his mind to writing about someone whose experiences he doesn't personally have, the results are often very good. In *The House in the Cerulean Sea*, Sal, a black teenager, reads a composition in front of the class, and that moment really resonated with Doc.

**Doc:** Yeah, no, I was just, I was just looking up that quote. Um. And it's, it's the way when, when Sal starts writing and he's like, I am but paper, brittle and thin, and, and then continues.

Um, they tell things for others to read. But they only see the words ~~and not the words~~ and not what the words are written upon. And I was, if that is not being black in America, I don't know what is.

**Shannon:** [00:00:00] Uh, my name is Shannon Outlaw and I live in Muncie, Indiana.

**Shannon:** [00:00:07] ... Okay. Olive Juice. TJ's book is, is brilliant. And it deals with an issue that isn't talked about, which is the missing white woman's syndrome.

[00:00:19] And it's important. It's so, so, so very important. This book broke me and I will never read it again. And I actually, took time out of my day to actually write TJ and explain why I think this book is so important and why I thanked him for writing it and why I apologize that I will never, ever be able to put myself through it again.

[00:01:04] Um, because voices need to be heard. Um, I told him about my stepdad, who is white, stepdad now. Good. Or, he's now officially my dad because he adopted me. But, um, he had to deal with the raising of two, uh, children of color, and that's different. He's got two biracial children, and this is an experience that he'd never had to deal with before.

[00:01:33] ... I want to say this was back in 2001 um, I'm a full grown adult. I was actually visiting him in Boston. I came over to the house. Um, I come in the house and he is sitting on the couch and he's wrecked.

[00:02:00] I mean, he's got. Tears in his eyes and he just looks broken. And I come in and obviously I know something's wrong and we're not one of those families where, you know, crying or showing your emotions isn't allowed. And I come in and I'm like, are you okay? And it had been all over the news. A white woman was missing in, uh, Mexico, and everyone was looking for her.

[00:02:21] And, um, it'd been going on and was on the news for, I want to say about a week or so. And he. Looks up at me and looks me in the eye and tells me if you ever, if something ever happens to you, I want you to know that I won't stop looking and that I won't let them stop talking about it because he realized that she was getting all this coverage because she was white and blonde, and that if it was a person of color gone missing.

[00:02:52] Sure the news would talk about it for a day, maybe two, and then the news cycle would change and it wouldn't be followed. It wouldn't be the world watching to see if they found this woman. It wouldn't be a week long interviews and talks with the family and all that. He was, it like, it was the, it was when it finally hit home for him that we live a life that's different than the majority of people in the US and I don't think it had ever hit him so hard before.

[00:03:20] Um, and it was a growing moment for him. It was really emotional moment, obviously for the both of us. Um, God damn do I love that man. But. That's when it really hit home for him. Um, so I'm reading Olive Juice and I'm thinking of my father, and I'm just as broken as I could possibly be because that's what TJ's words do.

**Tanya:** Um, when I read, uh, Why We Fight, you know, and I was like, okay, I'm gonna, I'm really curious as to how he's going to do this. And I think he did such a great job with Corey, uh, because, you know, not only just because he was bigender, but also because he was biracial.

[00:05:37] And so he explained it without making it all about that. And so you kind of got to enjoy who Corey was as a person, but understanding what his ethnic background was as well. There was a point where I think he was getting his hair done by Flavius and I had a moment where I was like, Oh my God, he's not going to cut off all that hair.

[00:06:03] And as a black person, we are taught from a very early age. You do not cut hair. So I kind of liked the fact that, you know, he had that momentary freak out because that was spot on. Because even for myself, I was like, Oh Lord, no, don't cut that man's hair. Please leave it alone. But then, you know, letting him emerge into something different.

[00:06:23] And then there's also a point, I guess, where Jeremy was like putting his hands in Cory's hair, and he was like, yeah, if it had been anybody else he would've lost a couple of fingers, but because it was him it was okay. That was also spot on. So I was like, he must have black friends or somebody that told him that one, we don't cut hair.

[00:06:38] And two, you do not put your hands in a black person's hair. But I think that was fantastic, because it's like these little tidbits that you get that are fantastic where you remember, but it's not the sole focus, and you get to fall in love with the character and fall in love with their role in the story based on who they are, not because they're whatever race they are, but because of the way that he's written, such a beautiful character.

[00:07:02] And it's also why I love Rico, because he's got like this great sense of humor where he'll bring his, you know, Latin roots in. But he's still like such an important part of the story that sometimes you just forget that he's, you know, a Latin person.

[00:07:16] But I did love in, um, uh, Heartsong where he was like, you know, know, you know, people of color are like the first ones to die in certain situations. And I was like, yeah. Right there, that's true. I laughed for so long off of that. I had to take a break and then come back cause it was so funny.

**Kirt:** So why does this white dude do this? And we know he can do it respectfully, but what makes him think he can?

**TJ:** [00:00:23] Because we're not all the same color. We're not all, we don't look alike. We're not, we don't act alike. We don't sound alike. We don't talk alike. That's just how the world is. And if your books are all filled at the same exact people, then regardless of what you're writing, that's not realistic. I don't care if you're writing fantasy.

I don't care if you're writing science fiction. I don't care if you're writing contemporary, if all you include in your book is people who, who, and this is geared towards white authors obviously, but if all you include are people who look like you, then you're not, there's something disingenuous about that.

Um, that being said, caveat, there are authors of color out there, or people of color who are under the belief that only people of color should tell stories about characters of color. And I can, I can respect that. I understand where they're coming from. It's the idea where I wrestle with own voices and should, are queer people only the only people who should tell queer stories?

No, I don't think so. I don't think that that's how it necessarily works. But you know. I include characters of color in my book because the world isn't black and white. That's not how it works. We are all together. We're all made up of different backgrounds, different faith, different beliefs, and it would be disingenuous not to include that in a book.

**Kirt:** I've come to see that TJ doesn't write characters of color as any type of grand gesture but because we live in a world full of different people and his books are also filled with different people. How does that make his readers feel?

**Shannon:** [00:03:16] Can I be completely honest? I feel seen. Is the easiest way for me to explain that because, um, so often people of color get forgotten and not represented. And literally every, everything. I mean, we draw the short straw in every community, including the LGBT community. We are constantly just this afterthought.

**Elaine:** [00:00:35] I really like it, seeing today's characters of color taking, you know, the lead role in books. And that's for a, or a bunch of reasons really. I mean. First of all, it's really nice to see a character of color take center stage.

So often people of color are either completely absent in fiction or, and there are so many books where if you think about it, everybody in the book is white, like you, you wouldn't know from reading that book that people of color existed. And the other times when you do have a person of color in a book, they're often just a side character.

**Tanya C.:** [00:04:15] Um, I really love the fact that, they're just characters that happen to be people of color. And a lot of times when I'm reading books that has people of color in it, there's, there's authors that get it and authors that don't. Everything that makes us person wonderful and miraculous and special, and I'm really going to focus on the fact that this is either an Asian person or a black person or a Latino person or whatever, rather than, this is just a character that happens to be a person of color. And so, I mean, I've, I've read quite a few books where I'm like, yes, we get it. It's a black person. Thank you. Thank you for stating this every five freaking seconds. But then I've read books where you're so absorbed in who the character is that you know this, but it's not the main focus because the main focus is that they're just a person, a character in the book. And I think that that's something that TJ does very well.

**Jeremiah:** [00:02:49] Uh, I gotta say it's like pretty refreshing to be honest with you. Cause even today as us, as a community, we are kind of like, we are a lot more aware of diversity and representation issues, not just within our, like the LGBTQ community by the community as a whole, like worldwide and everything. So, but even then there's a, there hasn't really been a lot of portrayals of like other, of other ethnic or cultural backgrounds.

**Kirt:** **I had a personal revelation during my conversations with these Klunatics. It occurred to me that, unless it's specifically mentioned that a character in a book is black, or LatinX, or Asian, or any other minority, I picture a white person in my mind. I am white and I picture people who look like me unless I'm told otherwise. And I thought this experience was universal. But I was wrong. When I asked these readers who they saw...**

**Dee:** [00:07:15] I think if I have to be honest. I would probably assume the person is white for the majority part.

**Elaine:** [00:03:57] So, here's the thing. Um.

We've all been programmed to think of white as the default. And I mean that, you know, not just white people have been programmed to think of white as the default, but people,

people from other cultures have been taught that white is the default. And part of it is, you know, sort of the implied message you get when you watch television and you watch movies where so often in the show all the characters are white.

**Jeremiah:** [00:06:08] yeah, you don't usually picture in your head someone who is of color. You always picture someone generally white,

**Shannon:** [00:03:41] And, in the US especially, white is the default, white is the norm. So when you read a book and they make a character, let's throw out Bella from Twilight, shall we? That is basic. They put out a character that doesn't give you a lot of descriptors on purpose so that you can put yourself into that role.

[00:04:02] That default role is always white.

**Tanya C.:** [00:11:30] White people. Unless they say, and then I'm pleasantly surprised and like a perfect example of this is when reading The Lightning Struck Heart. I just pictured Sam as white.

[00:11:42] And then I was having a conversation with Taffy and she was like, you know, he's biracial, right? And I was like, who? And she was like, Sam. I was like, no, he is not. And so then I go back and I relisten and I'm like, Oh.

**Elaine:** [00:19:32] Yes, this is a big one. Um, we try to be gentle because 99.99% of the time, people who whitewash characters in the group aren't doing it intentionally. And that comes back down to, you know, the fact that we've all sort of been conditioned to think of white as the default, and that spills over into what we see as beautiful.

Everything in our society programs us to think as white is the default. White is the standard. So a lot of the time people are unconsciously whitewashing the characters. So, so mostly we, you try to be really tactful about it and just say, you know, bearing in mind that, so and so in the books is a person of color or is biracial.

**Shannon:** [00:05:10] And so many times Sam was pictured as a white character. And I generally don't interact with those kinds of posts. They don't. But like the, that was the one that was bugging me so much because you're just erasing all of Sam's heritage... that's the only time I've ever actively been on the board being like, Hey, guess what? Sam's biracial. Hey, guess what Sam's biracial. Hey, Sam is biracial. Like, can we stop forgetting this?

[00:05:53] And TJ actually jumped in and made a post and was like, Hey, can we like not forget the fact that I made this character biracial? And like the fact that he, it wasn't even like on the thing that I commented, but it's just the fact that he posted that. Like I, I almost cried cause I was so like, thank you.

[00:06:11] Like please don't forget that we exist and don't try not to pretend that we're not here. And the fact that he took the time to do that was like, so important to me because so many of us don't fit.

**Kirt:** Strife within the industry is nothing new, between publishers and readers, readers and readers, authors and readers, authors and authors. It happens over, and over, and over again. The start of 2020 was no different unfortunately, and it won't be perfect unless we try to do better and work to understand each other a little more.

**Dee:** [00:13:54] So that's sad to hear because again, with there's so much discrimination between, in between, like within the romance group, Oh no, you write, m/m, no, you write Omegaverse. Everyone, there's something for everyone. You know, you don't have to bash what I like or what I want to write.

[00:14:13] It's romance. As long as it's romance, you know, somewhere in down the line, don't, don't nitpick. And that's, you know, it shouldn't happen.

**Kirt:** Let's hope that we're all a little more accepting in the future. Speaking of the future...

**Kirt:** So without spoiling anything, will we see more people of color as main characters in your books in the future?

**TJ:** [00:02:43] Yes. There is specifically in, um, uh, The Tremendous Death of Wallace Price um, my next adult book from Tor that comes out next year *(Allow me to interrupt for just a second to let you know that right before this podcast went live, TJ announced that the book he's describing will now be titled Under the Whispering Door)*, the, the, there's two main characters and the love interest, the other main character is a black man. Um, my third adult book from Tor is In the Lives of Puppets, and the main character in that is biracial and is a person with autism.

And, um, The Extraordinaries, House in the Cerulean Sea, have major side characters who are people of color. The Extraordinaries 2 introduces a Latinx drag queen. There is a, in The Extraordinaries 3, I have plans that I can't quite get into at this point, but yes, there will be something for everyone, I like to think, because again, we have to have that kind of representation in books because that's how the world is. We're not, we're not all the same. We don't all look alike, and that's important that it stays that way.

**Kirt:** And while we wait for more TJ books to be released Jeremiah and Shannon have ideas on how to try to seek out more diverse reads. You can even just ask the Klunatics if you want recommendations, they have a lot, A LOT.

**Jeremiah:** [00:22:33] I guess if we're going to go more into like advice on how to actually help readers kind of authentically diversify their reading experiences, like what I will say is at the same time it's best to try to talk to people in different cultures, like, listen to their stories, be it verbal or written because you can't really fully appreciate like someone's else's experiences, unless you have some kind of form of frame of reference for it.

**Shannon:** Okay. So as far as readers go, branch out, don't just follow the same four people.

[00:04:30] I mean, I know that you have your loves and that's great, but try out different books and try out, um, own voice authors. Um, especially for m/m readers go towards books that are written by actual men. Um, when it comes to having, uh, different diversity in your characters, go with some diverse authors, just branch out.

**Kirt:** [00:05:43] That if you're sitting and listening and thinking like, Oh, I can't think of the last time I read a book by a black author. Well, Amazon's not going to show you books by black authors if you're not already reading them.

[00:05:55] So you have to make a choice to do that.

**Shannon:** [00:05:59] And it's so important that you do because you're going to find some amazing work out there when you take the time and effort to put into it, and that's all. That's really what it is, it's just put a little bit of effort in.

**Kirt:** [00:06:13] Yeah, and it's not like, it's not like you better do this for your own good.

[00:06:16] It's like, no, no, no, no. There's really great work out there that you're not experiencing. Like this is for your own, your own benefit. Like you will enjoy this.

**Shannon:** I'm not saying you're going to love everything that you stumble upon, but there's some amazing voices out there that you're not even giving a chance. Because again, Amazon's algorithms aren't even suggesting them because it's not something that you've tuned into. Don't just let Amazon continue to choose the next thing that you read.

[00:08:32] Don't just click on the recommended by you. Actively seek out other authors. Get outside of your comfort zone. Um. And listen. That's it. That's really all. It all goes back down to actually listening to people of color

**Kirt:** [00:09:39] Yeah. Obviously I have nothing to add to that.

[00:09:45] Uh, just a white guy doing an episode about diversity.

**Shannon:** [00:09:54] Doing it so well.

## **Conclusion**

**Kirt:** Well, guys, we did it! We solved racism! Woo hoo!

**No, just kidding, Obviously this is the just the beginning of a conversation that must continue. It's a conversation that can be had in podcasts, yes, but it should also be had in families and friend groups and neighborhoods all around the world. And white people, you should *not* be doing most of the talking.**

Thanks for listening to these first seven episodes of the Klunatics Podcast. We hope you're enjoying them. Just a heads up that we're going to take a week off next week, but that doesn't mean your podcast feed will be empty. Look for a little something to fill the gap until Episode 8 comes out in two weeks. In the meantime, make sure you're telling anyone who will listen about the podcast and about TJ's latest book, *The House in the Cerulean Sea*.

### Credits

**Kirt:** [00:05:53] Are there any, um, any characters in male/male romance at all or TJ specifically that you relate to?

**Dee:** [00:06:02] Cripes. If I had to choose somebody, I would probably say, huh. That's a hard one.

[00:06:12] But I would probably say Kevin, sadly, because I do have a, I do think that I'm pretty damn good, myself, so yeah. So I would say, Kevin.

**Kirt:** [00:06:26] Not an answer I expected, but I love it.