

## APL Volumes

### Season 1, Episode 7: *TENDER IS THE FLESH*

*This episode was transcribed by APL volunteer Martha Ladyman.*

#### BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

MADDY: Hello and welcome to APL Volumes, a new podcast from the Austin Public Library. In this first season, we're going to be exploring the horror genre and its six main subgenres: Humor, Psychological, Paranormal, Cosmic, Gothic, and Visceral. This episode is all about the Visceral subgenre, and the book *Tender Is the Flesh* by Agustina Bazterrica. I'm Maddy, your host for the season, and an Adult Services librarian at APL's Central library. Later this episode I'll be joined by Hannah Shepherd, my APL co-worker in our Circulation department, to really sink our teeth into *Tender Is the Flesh*.

#### MUSIC

Visceral is a bit of an umbrella term, covering both the theme of body horror and the splatterpunk genre of the 1980s. Visceral stories have two goals: everything in excess, and horrific shock value. Body horror is as old as the horror genre itself, though both it and splatterpunk are most often associated with movies these days. As *Horror Literature through History* notes, *Frankenstein*, quote, "provides an early example of the subgenre's preoccupations with transitional or intermediate bodily states and the possibilities inherent in matter." From that point on, the idea of horrific transformations from the human to the inhuman are present, if not front and center, in much of horror literature. And then we jump 150 years to note that, quote, "The development of prosthetics-based special effects technologies throughout the 1970s and 1980s... is perhaps the reason why the subgenre is most associated with film."

Splatterpunk, on the other hand, is fully inside the modern horror movement. It originated in the 1980s among a small subset of American horror authors. While the term was coined by David J. Schow in 1986, the movement is generally traced to Michael Shea's 1980 short story "The Autopsy." Splatterpunk came about as a reactionary style to the popular titles that had been published in the horror genre in the two decades previous, stories that were characterized by a rather restrained writing style – like we see in *The Shining* and King's other early work. And, as the name might suggest, splatterpunk also takes punk culture into account. It pushes against the style of mainstream horror of the time, but it also pushes the content of horror to become a subversive medium, much like punk music. Supporters of splatterpunk also argue that splatterpunk is punk in terms of progressive – after all, every individual, regardless of gender, race, or sexual identity, is as equal a victim as the next. (That being said, class differences often still remain.) The pain and the suffering do not pick favorites.

So because, unlike other subgenres, there are no real boundaries hemming in the horrors of splatterpunk – which is a feature, rather than a bug – defining splatterpunk and defining its authors is debated, contested, and overall a difficult goal to achieve. That being said, there are still works that are definitively splatterpunk. *Horror Literature Through History* cites Clive Barker's *Books of Blood* in 1984-85 as one of the earliest examples of splatterpunk – the story "The Midnight Meat Train", quote, "pushed the boundaries of horror with its visceral descriptions of bodily horror, [and] Barker's books marked a shift to the new style of horror." Becky Spratford also credits Barker's writing with feeding the modern audience's, quote, "growing fascination with slasher films." Other important works of early splatterpunk are *The Nightrunners* by Joe R. Lansdale, published in 1983, and *The Scream* by John Skipp and Craig Spector, published in 1988.

Splatterpunk peaked in the early 90s, perhaps because of the rise of the horror movie industry – as T.Z. Barry notes, the ability to exploit an additional sense through sound and music heightens the experience of fright. And while I came across a lot of articles at the pop culture level about the visceral genre in film, there were very few about the visceral genre for books.

Luckily for fans of Visceral, however, modern Latin American authors have been bringing this subgenre back to life and are shaking up the male-dominated space.

Visceral is maybe the easiest horror subgenre to recommend, because it is the easiest to tell who would not like it. In Visceral books, gore, violence, sexual violence, and strong language are all amplified. This is your content warning for these appeal aspects, as well as for *Tender Is the Flesh* – please take care of your own mental health while engaging with this topic.

I also want to mention that body horror has a complicated history with ableism, and even if you or your reader feel they can handle the excesses most often associated with the Visceral subgenre, it's important to keep in mind that while body horror inherently looks to the human body, there are some stories that exploit real-life disabilities as the horror—as the monstrous, as the dreaded outcome, as the villain's origin. Disabilities are not horrific, and it is a bad Visceral story that would use them like that.

Plot: Both plot and setting are the main driving forces of Visceral stories. The best way to describe the standard Visceral plot is the movie *The Purge*. In order to allow-slash-achieve violent excess of every kind that defines the subgenre, the plot has to follow someone or a group of someones as they navigate – literally or figuratively – a world that has already descended into lawlessness. As for the ending of the plot: Visceral stories, because of their near-apocalyptic settings, aren't too concerned with ending the horror. They're just concerned with their protagonists getting through it alive.

Pacing: The pace of Visceral stories is usually relatively fast, but often has lulls to heighten the drama. It doesn't creep as much as a Gothic story, but think about a zombie movie – even in the midst of running, escaping, and fighting, there's always a moment or two where the protagonists are hiding and you are just waiting for that jump scare that sets the plot and pacing back off running. The splatterpunk side of the subgenre is often nonstop, breakneck speed, while the body horror can sometimes lean a little more to the slow-build side.

Writing style: The writing style is maybe the greatest variant. It can be cruel, funny, detached... The writing style always elevates the sheer much-ness of a Visceral story, but it isn't the main focus.

Mood/atmosphere: Gory, gritty, stomach-turning – and reveling in the excess. You feel that the main character is always one step away from succumbing to the excesses around them – and maybe so are you.

For setting: Visceral stories often take place in a large city or set along a road trip, and the world at large is usually near- or post-apocalyptic. Just like the plot, the setting has to allow for a lot of excess. If a story leans more towards the body horror side, this can stay true, or can instead zoom in to just one building, like a science lab or underground bunker.

Characters: Since Visceral stories are heavily driven by the plot and the mood, characters are not the main reason readers come to these stories. Usually the protagonist will be sympathetic – or as sympathetic as you can get– and will have a traumatic past that spawns an emotion that keeps them from numbing to the horrors around them – usually grief or a need for revenge.

Since *Tender Is the Flesh* is an English translation of the original Spanish (its original title translates to Exquisite Corpse), I thought it's important to take a look at the tradition of horror in Argentine media, particularly literature and film. This tradition turned out to be quite new, and with strong Visceral roots.

In 1996, *El Mal Menor* (The Lesser Evil) by C.E. Feiling was published. Now a cult classic, this novel is considered the first Argentine horror novel – the director/screenwriter Natalia Meta, who adapted the novel as a psychological thriller for the screen, described it as “hard and gruesome,” and as belonging to the gore genre.

The next year saw Pablo Parés and Hernán Sáez's 1997 film *Plaga Zombie* land in theaters, a movie that Dread Central says can be credited with “sparkling the fire of contemporary Argentinian horror” and which helped set off

the, quote, “explosion of horror films at the turn of the century,” securing Argentina as Latin America’s other heaviest hitter in horror cinema alongside Mexico. And what’s more gruesome and steeped in body horror than a zombie movie?

Since the nineties, Argentina has continued to lean into horror, and the 2010s saw a huge boom in horror literature, not only in Argentina, but across Latin America. Mariana Enriquez, the leading lady of horror in Argentina, helms this charge, and has spoken on this topic at length – check out this episode’s shownotes for some great articles and interviews with her. In a Guardian piece, she refers to the idea that the region is often associated with the magical realism of the 1960s, and says “The continent had another mood. We were young countries and despite decades of poverty and conflict, there was hope, the future seemed bright. I wonder if that optimism’s gone now.”

From 1974-1983, Argentina was under a military dictatorship, called the Dirty War or Operation Condor, during which left-wing activists were hunted and somewhere between 9,000 and 30,000 people were disappeared. Other countries across South and Central America were experiencing similar dictatorships during this time as well.

Many of the new horror authors of Latin America were children during these dictatorships and times of deep fear and unrest. In a piece for LitHub, Enriquez says, “I asked myself: what were the first written texts, the first horror texts that I had ever read? They were the testimonies of the dictatorship. Bodies disappeared. Common everyday houses which served as concentration camps in neighborhoods. The secrecy of it all, the negation of reality. Children in this time taken from their parents and given another name.” To them, as Adriana Goicochea notes in the book *Gothic Looks: From Fear To Horror in The Current Argentinian Narrative*, “terror has the face of dictatorship and capitalism.” These authors take inspiration from the terrorism and dictatorships, the current poverty and violence of the Latin America’s modern cities, and the sinister elements of folklore that the optimism of magical realism often passed over in favor of lighter ones.

In addition to Enriquez, new Latin American horror authors, who span subgenres from Gothic to Visceral, include Mexico’s Silvia Moreno-Garcia and Mateo García Elizondo (the grandson of Gabriel García Marquez), Ecuador’s Monica Ojeda, Peru’s Gustavo Faverón Patriau, Puerto Rico’s Ann Dávila Cardinal, and Argentina’s Samanta Schweblin and, of course, Agustina Bazterrica.

Bazterrica herself is a child of the Argentine dictatorship, and spent the first 9-10 years of her life living under it. In addition to *Tender is the Flesh*, Bazterrica has published another novel, her debut which came out in 2013, called *Kill the Girl* – full of irony and dark humor, set in a tormented world full of homicidal angels and celestial bureaucracy. Bazterrica also wrote a book of short stories, first titled *Before the Fierce Encounter*, then republished as *Nineteen Claws and a Dark Bird*, which is described as containing “identical doses of fright and happiness” and as displaying “a humor that leads to the freezing of a smile.” Clearly, this author is no stranger to the uncanny valley nor to the twisting of the societal structures we rely on and look to for guidance, and this all comes to a terrifying and sickening head in *Tender Is the Flesh*.

Now, on the surface, from the back copy, *Tender Is the Flesh* does not seem like hardcore Visceral. But I will be totally honest with you, I cannot read too much splatterpunk without worrying that I will straight-up pass out, and I don’t think workers comp covers fainting from reading a book. So I wanted something that toed the line. Joke’s on me, though.

*Tender Is the Flesh* takes place in the near-future after a mysterious, deadly virus is found in all animals and is contagious to humans. This renders all types of meat inedible – except for humans. Cannibalism is quickly sanctioned, and the meat industry is remade to handle humans. Oh god, I could barely get through that sentence. Okay, smash-cut to a handful of years in, and we are following Marcos, a man probably in his mid-thirties, who is the manager of one of the processing plants. He is good at his job because his father ran a processing plant for farm animals prior to the virus, but he hates it and he refuses to eat “special meat” – and yes, I am doing air quotes around “special meat”. A client gifts him a highly prized specimen, which Marcos does not want and does not want

to be responsible for. But Jasmine, as he names her, becomes pregnant, and Marcos no longer has the luxury of living with one foot on either side of the line.

If the defining characteristic of *Visceral* is “everything in excess”, *Tender Is the Flesh* passes with flying colors. We see every step of the slaughterhouse process, and we also see how people use the finest cuts to garner social clout. When Marcos discovers that his sister is keeping a specimen in a live-in freezer off her kitchen and is cutting off limbs to prepare fresh, I was pretty sure I would never read a book again.

The distinction of classes and who gets to eat who, as well as the distrust of the government, invokes the punk side of splatterpunk. The descriptions of the humans in the various stages of the processing, including how their bodies are tampered with, is solidly in the realm of body horror. Cannibalism is also body horror, but that just feels like a gimme.

Bazterrica’s use of Argentina’s history, and the Dirty War in particular, is obvious throughout. People are sent to the slaughterhouse as punishment, rather than to jail; Marcos relies on his ties within the government to keep Jasmine hidden; after people die, there is no telling where their bodies go; citizens are convinced that the government made up the virus to control the threat of overpopulation and dictate who lives and who dies. I could list a half dozen more examples, but altogether they paint a picture made up of the horror of not knowing who might be the next one disappear.

Bazterrica also goes another layer further into Argentine history, with the introduction of the laboratory. After World War II, many Nazis fled Germany and went to Argentina to avoid being brought to justice for their crimes – Argentina’s leader at the time, Juan Peron, as well as many influential businessmen and government officials were openly in support of the Axis powers throughout the war. In *Tender Is the Flesh*, the reader gets a mercifully short glimpse of the laboratory, whose head scientist Marcos even compares to the Nazi scientist Mengele, and it is not hard to draw a line from the experiments and eugenics described to those performed by the Nazis in concentration camps and what might have continued under Peron’s Third Way.

So Bazterrica uses twentieth-century history to ground her story and make it all the more plausible. But what about the technical aspects?

Plot: Like many *Visceral* stories, *Tender Is the Flesh* is propelled by the plot and the setting. The story adheres to the general plot standards of the subgenre, where the protagonist, Marcos, is attempting to live his daily life in a world that is unrecognizable and trying to walk the fine line of his own morals. Marcos works at a processing plant for humans, but will not eat the special meat, and his personal disgust with the quick turn to widely accepted cannibalism provides many daily foils that we watch him navigate. And while the arrival of Jasmine and then the pregnancy reveal are foils, they don’t directly affect the plot nearly as much as Marcos’s increasing refusal to participate in the society and in his job does.

The wrap-up to the plot is truly vile, but it keeps to what visceral stories are like. Marcos will do whatever it takes to get his pre-Transition life back, and the horror of the world continues on.

Pacing: The pacing in *Tender Is the Flesh* is surprisingly slow for the subgenre. Part 1 is mostly concerned with unfurling the never-ending horrors of the world through Marcos’s day-to-day life. Even the arrival of the gift doesn’t change the pacing much, except to accelerate Marcos’s breakdown – and then Part 1 ends and we have a time jump. But there is something so insidious about the time jump of eight months between parts, because you know nothing has changed in the world outside of Marcos’s house.

Marcos’s mental state on the other hand is deteriorating rapidly, and while the writing still stays at a distance, where and when Marcos will break starts to get the pace moving faster. And then, just over halfway through part 2, we suddenly have a handful of back-to-back one-page chapters, which serve to signal the true breaking point.

Writing style: I'll be honest, when I started reading *Tender Is the Flesh*, I thought I'd made a mistake choosing it to represent the Visceral subgenre, and that was mostly due to the writing style. On the literary side, straightforward and matter-of-fact, I was both worried and intrigued by how it didn't match up with what I've come to expect from the Visceral subgenre – a leaning into the grossness, where the reader is expected to provide their own detachment from the horror. And while I was reassured of the Visceral nature of the book by page 3, the writing style remained matter-of-fact throughout, which was somehow, for me at least, much, much worse.

Bazterrica, and her English translator Sarah Moses, approach the plot and the terms used to describe its concepts with a straightforwardness that can catch you off guard. The terms are used to shield the people of the story from their own horrors, but it only serves to remind the reader of the dehumanization on a global scale. The writing style is also very self-aware; Marcos remarks many times at the beginning how these terms are used to, quote, "cover up the world."

Mood/atmosphere: Deeply sickening. That scientific detachment, describing the entire slaughterhouse process, meeting minute characters that are excited by that process, learning that the Most Dangerous Game is real for a price... Every corner you turn, every aspect of society is now totally and completely connected to the special meat industry.

Setting: We are in a medium-to-large city in Argentina, though it is hard to gauge, and I imagine that is on purpose, because of the references to the empty streets and to how far away Marcos lives from different places and people. The plants that Marcos visits and works at seems larger than life, and even bigger than the urban center itself – if only because the story views them as being more populated. Ugh, which is awful.

In Part 2, we get a glimpse of the laboratory, which had been mysteriously mentioned once before as a place Marcos actively avoided going to. If this book had instead a main theme of body horror, it is easy to imagine that the story could have taken place entirely within the walls of that labyrinth of horrors.

Characters: While the story revolves around Marcos and his daily life, this story isn't exactly character-driven. Marcos is a vessel for the setting, rather than for his own character growth (or degradation, as the case may be). *Tender Is the Flesh* follows the standard Visceral character aspect by giving its protagonist a trauma-induced emotion that keeps him from either suffering a breakdown or becoming numb to the horrors and indulging in them. Marcos suffers from extreme grief due to the death of his child, and he himself notes that this pain is the only thing keeping him from normalizing cannibalism:

There are many minor characters, who also serve more as part of the world-building than as characters, which is not a bad thing! Bazterrica also keeps us on our toes by never establishing whether Jasmine should be viewed as a character.

Like with the pacing, Part 2 demonstrates a shift in focus on the characters. They start to break out of the boxes Marcos, and by extension Bazterrica, put them in. Our protagonist remains the protagonist but is no longer a possible hero – he succumbed to the world briefly, and now it has infected him, and we are waiting to see if he can fight it – which, spoiler alert, he cannot. We see his failure in such a way that we are disgusted by it – but the book also forces us to ask if we would fare any better.

MUSIC

MADDY: Hannah! Welcome! We're going to talk about *Tender Is the Flesh*.

HANNAH: Hi! Thanks so much for having me. I'm excited.

MADDY: Of course. I mean, I feel like when I asked you to read this with me, or when you volunteered to read this with me, neither of us really knew what we were getting into for this book.

Well, before we get started into that, I would love to know more about your relationship with horror is, what your favorite piece of horror media is, and also if you read inside of the visceral subgenre usually.

HANNAH: Yeah, so I really relate to horror that kind of shows the horrors of society, like the real aspects of it. So my favorite piece probably in contrast to that would be *Uzumaki* by Junji Ito.

MADDY: Graphic novel, right?

HANNAH: It's a graphic novel, but it depicts horror in unconventional ways, through like spirals and snails and like sweat and oil. It's really great. I love it. It kind of makes the horrifying fun, which is what I like about it.

On the other side, the more realistic horror, things like *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, and *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulker. Those are really horrifying, but in a very realistic way. And those are some of my favorites.

MADDY: So none of those really get into, let's say, I don't know, cannibalism. But do you find yourself, whether it is watching movies or reading books, falling into this body horror-slash-splatterpunk-slash-butcher shop kind of horror?

HANNAH: Usually not. I picked this book because it was a dystopian society, and dystopian societies are something I enjoy reading about a lot. I thought the cannibalism would be kind of a minor note. But it turned out to be the major note in the subject. So definitely shocking. Not something that I normally go for.

But I thought it was a good pick.

MADDY: Yeah, I feel the same way. I feel like I grew up reading a lot of horror, psychological and gothic, and fell out of love with horror because I was surrounded by like real gory horror. And it just felt so over the top. Or it wasn't explained or earned in the kind of way that I would have enjoyed. And it really took *Tender Is the Flesh* to get me back into that kind of really thoughtful, terrifying, splattery horror.

So we can talk about the book itself. We are going to talk a lot about scenes that made our stomach turn, that made us weirdly hopeful for, if not humanity, maybe dogs. I don't know.

So let's say this. *Tender Is the Flesh* has been optioned for a TV show. Which is really exciting because, as someone who like fully gagged maybe every two scenes, two pages, this is really going to take a turn. I mean I'll watch it, but what kind of scenes do you want to see most brought to life on the screen?

HANNAH: Most? Well, I think obviously the gore I think is necessary to really get the point across. But there are also some subtle scenes. Especially his trips to the zoo I think are really important for his psychological development throughout the story and really shows where his state of mind is at after each kind of traumatic experience he goes through. So I think those are really important. And also beautiful. It's like the only peaceful times in the whole book, it feels like.

MADDY: Yeah. When he's laying up in the bird nest on those glass bridges. I was like, "Wow, I could actually stay there. I would love to be on this bird bridge in another world and timeline."

Yeah, I think for me I just always think of the creepiest parts are the equivalent of jump scares that this book has, right. So, the reveal of the walk-in freezer off of his sister's kitchen, with a full person. He realizes that she's serving a fresh arm at their father's wake.

Sorry, Stephen. He's making the wildest faces as we are describing a book he hasn't read.

And he's like, "This arm is too fresh. My sister isn't wealthy enough to get this kind of quality meat." And he backtracks into the kitchen and she chases him and he sees a special meat specimen in that walk-in freezer missing an arm.

HANNAH: And wasn't she like still alive? In this freezer?

MADDY: Yes. She's fully still alive. Yes. So they can keep... Oh my god, it's so gross. The implication is that she will continue to lose a limb or so at a time until they have to kill her altogether and eat what's left.

What about, what do you think was, whether it can be included in the TV show or not, what do you think the most disgusting or over-the-top scene for you was? You don't have to limit it to one.

HANNAH: For me, one that really sticks out is the point when the father is celebrating the birth of his new child and they are all gathered around and eating a young boy, because it is the most tender, of course. But that's how they celebrate. Celebrating life with killing life. It's just, yeah.

MADDY: What about the most deadliest game? The hunting of the rock star?

HANNAH: That was really traumatizing. Because at that point I realized the line between what they considered head and human is very, very thin and I can only imagine it's a lot thinner in the places that we don't see in the book. Potentially the future as well.

MADDY: Yeah. I just always think of that photo, that polaroid they take of him draped over their shoulders, *Weekend at Bernie's* style but also like poacher style. And then they serve his fingers as appetizers later on, and other things related to his body that I can't say on air.

HANNAH: I thought it was really interesting how, oh, I forgot his name, he was totally fine with eating a particular part of a man's body but was definitely not OK with being called a...

MADDY: A queer slur?

HANNAH: Yeah. Can't say that. Yeah, that was a little ridiculous. He was like, "No, no, no." But he'll eat...

MADDY: "This makes me virile." But it's still human.

Yeah, the book never lets you forget that the head and the special meat are human, but it's really good at slipping in these scenes that almost make you forget, where everyone else has clearly forgotten, or done such a good job of making themselves forget.

And also, how far does it have to back up? Like you talk about these pure-grade, oh my god, generationally pure in terms of livestock generations. So how long has this been happening? What does a generation of livestock look like in terms of a human generation? How long have, since Marcos has been alive, right, it's happened, and it seems to have been pretty recent, but it's just, it's so gross. It's just so gross.

Any other scenes that stick out to you? We can do a smash cut of them.

HANNAH: The parts when they take a piece of flesh out of her arm and she screams but she can't make any noise because her vocal cords are cut out. That one really got to me.

MADDY: I know. Like when they genetically remove, they've genetically removed the ability for people to have vocal cords. I forgot about that. The German is touring the facility and he's like, "I don't want to try it." And they like plunge and draw out, essentially like sashimi?

HANNAH: Steak tartare.

MADDY: Yes. Exactly. Thank you.

They never address what happened to all the fish, which is interesting. But I don't know. Because I feel like I would just go live on an island by myself if this happened.

Well, what do we think of the ending? So we see Marcos pretty much able to fully draw that line between himself and the society he lives in until the end of part one, when he does have what we think is a, what we are led to believe is a brief moment of moral weakness and he does rape Jasmine, the special meat gift that he has been given.

But we then jump those eight months and she's pregnant and is tied to a bed and left to a room alone, but he cuddles her every night and cares about this child. And then his mental breakdown continues and continues until the ending. Which I have not spoiled yet in this episode. But we should talk about it.

HANNAH: It really shocked me. I could see that something bad was going to happen, but I couldn't tell what. But I didn't think Jasmine would die. I thought it was going to be more of a conflict between Cecilia and him and Jasmine and that issue.

MADDY: Yeah, and whether the baby is a "baby human" or "special meat."

Yeah, I don't know why I was so engrossed in the world itself that it never occurred to me that his wife would come back and they would just pretend that nothing had happened.

Oh, that last line where he decides to kill Jasmine and Cecilia is like, "We could have gotten more out of her. We could have kept having babies through her." And then he says, "as he drags the body of the female to the barn to slaughter it, he says to Cecilia, his voice radiant, so pure it wounds, 'She had the human look of a domesticated animal.'"

And it's just... We're both cringing, which you can't see. But we are cringing so hard!

The author has done such an amazing job of layering the taboos of interacting with special meat. People go to jail, but it's not jail, it's just a slaughterhouse, to also become special meat, if they have sexual affairs with special meat or head.

There's all of these taboos keeping special meat inside your house, treating it as human. And we see Marcos trying so hard to, at least in the first part of the book, to still remind himself and remind himself that they are not domesticated animals, they are humans.

And for that it just felt like a total slap in the face for him to fully become indoctrinated. Because we do kind of root for him. Once the end of part one happens, you are kind of "Wait, what? No. You were supposed to not fall victim to this." And then...

HANNAH: I thought it was super interesting how like right before he does the deed he is talking about his dogs and how much he misses them. Right before he also has to kill the dogs because of the infection. And then he immediately goes into the scene with Jasmine and does what he does.

It seems like with that time jump and the way that he's treated her since then that he's just treating her like a dog once again. Like, "Oh, I miss my dogs. I'm going to make one with this person, this Jasmine." And it took her getting into the knives and being covered in blood for him to realize that she needs enrichment and some sort of something.

MADDY: Yeah, that's such a good point. The enrichment factor, where he's like, "She needs to learn how to read." And he's like, "What can I teach her? She can't speak because her tongue has been cut out."

Oh my god, every time I say something I remember more about this book. Yeah, like put her in front of the TV, but it's like raising a child but also raising a dog. But I guess in hindsight he's also kind of preparing to raise his kid again? And using her as this weird nesting ground? I don't know.

HANNAH: And he never really, even when he's doing all this, he never really refers to her as human. She's still only head.

MADDY: And mostly just Jasmine. I think he really tries to avoid referring to her outside of her name at all. Which really shows the subliminal space that we are meant to think she exists in, but that the author already knows where she's going to fall, on which side of the line.

It's so gross. It's just, the whole thing is...

Does this book make you more or less likely to read other books like it?

HANNAH: Definitely more. Since reading it I've already been looking into, I need a readalike because I have not read anything this graphic and this horrifying in a really long time. So yeah, I've been trying to find other books that reach this kind of level. But it's going to be kind of hard to match, honestly.

MADDY: Yeah. It's also rather sneaky because it's such a literary tone where it's not really, I mean, it's literary straightforward writing. It isn't the kind of like blunt gore language that I think books like this follow.

Well, lucky for you also, I have readalikes ready.

I didn't think of many watchalikes or movies. If anyone listens to *The Magnus Archives*, the horror fiction podcast, the entity of the Flesh is extremely familiar, comes up a lot in parallels to this book.

And also like David Cronenberg's movies, very gory but socially bent.

But actually one of the books that I was picking between for this subgenre is called *Things Have Gotten Worse Since We Last Spoke* by Eric LaRocca. You're pointing. Yes, you also have that?

HANNAH: That is on my list, yes, of readalikes.

MADDY: Yeah. It's a novella and I've heard great things about it. But I don't know why, I just decided to choose this one instead.

What else is on your list?

HANNAH: So if you want something with more cannibals, there is a new 2022 movie on Hulu called *Fresh*. Also about cannibalism. But it's a comedy so maybe a little lighter as well as horrifying.

And then I have *A Certain Hunger* by Chelsea Summers. It's a serial killer-slash-baker and you can guess what she bakes.

If you want more body horror, I have *Things Have Gotten Worse Since We Last Spoke*. I think that's great that we both have it. It's probably a good one.

*Hogg* by Samuel Delany. That one was too much for me. I could not finish that. But if you can, good luck.

*Body Shocks*. It's a short story collection, but it's pretty graphic.

And then if you want a place that's void of ethical considerations, which this book very much is, I picked *Outer Dark* by Cormac McCarthy. I like this book. I've never read a Cormac McCarthy book that I don't like. It's about a young woman who carries her brother's baby. There's incest, cannibalism, and death. And so I really like that one as well.

MADDY: All the boxes.

Yeah, I will say *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, is usually seen as the premiere English language splatterpunk book. And visceral book. So I'm glad you said that.

I also have *Body Shocks* body horror anthology on my list as well.

In terms of, also like *Outer Dark*, where you are really leaning into the no holds barred, no boundaries, which is very much what this subgenre is all about. There are no boundaries. There are no limits. Everybody is a victim. *The Doloriad*, which just came out, by Missouri Williams. Also incestuous and cannibalism and all of those things.

*Earthater* by Dolores Reyes. Another Argentine author using social commentary to heighten the terror. It takes place in an urban center in Argentina. It is a little bit more on the fantastical, magical realism side, but if you like *Tender Is the Flesh* and are looking for more interesting commentary like that, what a city would look like under these kinds of constraints, I would point you in that direction.

HANNAH: I also think she has a new collection of short stories coming out. Augustina Bazterrica dos. And I think that collection would be awesome to read as soon as it comes out. I'm definitely going to get it.

MADDY: Yes. We'll be the first two holds.

HANNAH: Yes.

MADDY: I'm excited to read her other stuff as well. Well, her other short story collection and then her first novel.

Was there anything else you would like to talk about?

HANNAH: We should talk about dreamcasting.

MADDY: Yes! Oh my gosh. Fancasts? Let's fancast this TV show.

Tell me, who are you thinking?

HANNAH: I'll start with Jasmine, because I think she really stands out to me. I picked Anya Taylor-Joy because I think she has a really ethereal look to her.

MADDY: And she's Argentine.

HANNAH: Oh, yeah. OK. He also refers to her as really beautiful. I just can't imagine Jasmine being treated that way and not being like some ethereal being.

MADDY: And also, and is this weird to say, she kind of has like big cow eyes. Like there's a weird, I think you could really heighten the effect of her eyes to make it feel like trick of the light animal. I like that a lot.

HANNAH: Yeah. I agree.

For Celia I picked Florence Pugh. She's the girl that was in *Midsommar*.

MADDY: Oh, I am familiar with the works of Florence Pugh, yes.

HANNAH: She has such a great sad face.

MADDY: Her pout, yes!

HANNAH: Yeah, she'd be such a great Celia because she's sad.

MADDY: That's all you need.

HANNAH: Yeah.

MADDY: And I think her work in *Midsommar* shows, that last scene where Celia is, you know, also looks at Jasmine as head, just use of that.

Yeah, that would be fun.

HANNAH: So for Marcos I picked Oscar Isaac because I think he has really trusting eyes. But also like kind of terrifying eyes at the same time. You are like, "I don't know if I should trust you or not."

I think that fits the role perfectly.

MADDY: That's a great point.

HANNAH: I picked Michael C. Hall for Krieg just because he plays a really good distant kind of boss type.

MADDY: Managerial.

HANNAH: Yeah.

I don't know. Christopher Walken for Urlet. That's all I got.

MADDY: Ooh, OK.

I don't know if this is too weird. Who would you pick to be the dead celebrity? Playing as themselves? Credited as playing themselves?

HANNAH: I would pick a celebrity that has fallen in favor recently. In media.

MADDY: In favor or out of favor?

HANNAH: Out of favor.

MADDY: Like Jared Leto?

HANNAH: Yeah, perfect. Jared Leto.

MADDY: I don't know why, but when we were reading it, I kept picturing Mick Jagger? I don't know why. It just felt very like rock star-y.

Who is out of favor and fallen into debt so much that they would let themselves be hunted for sport? I think Jared Leto is a pretty good idea, if I do say so myself.

HANNAH: Or, oh, what's his name? *National Treasure* guy?

MADDY: Nic Cage?

HANNAH: Yeah.

MADDY: But I think he would pay for the honor of being hunted for sport. I've seen his pyramid in New Orleans. I feel like he might defeat the purpose. But yeah, I think he could put on a good show. He certainly would try.

Who would be the sister? Who would be a good...

HANNAH: Oh, I didn't think about her too much. Because I didn't like her. She was such a terrible sister and terrible person.

MADDY: Yes, she was. I haven't fancasted at all. I just saw *Glass Onion*, so everyone in my brain is just the cast of *Glass Onion*.

Kathryn Hahn would do a good job.

HANNAH: I thought of Jenna Ortega for Spanel. She was the girl who just did Wednesday Addams.

MADDY: Oh, yeah. As one of the kids?

HANNAH: No, she's actually like twenty or something.

MADDY: Oh, sorry.

HANNAH: For Spanel the butcher.

MADDY: Oh, interesting.

HANNAH: Because I feel like she does a really good dead in the eyes look.

MADDY: I think I was picturing someone older, like Gillian Anderson. Cold Margaret Thatcher-y. Best cuts. Slip some stuff under the table.

HANNAH: Oh yeah, I could definitely see that more. Maybe like some powerlifter type? Maybe like Hiroyuki Sanada for Urami? He was in like *Westworld* and *Avengers*.

MADDY: I really like this fancast you are putting together. I think we should contact whoever the agent is and get them this stat. It would be like, we've already chosen who we want to be the worst people in the world. Please consider this list.

I really like Anya Taylor-Joy as Jasmine because she is described as being very ethereal, described in a way that would make you think she was really beautiful and ethereal, again, as a human, even though she's already a human. Yeah, choosing someone who is known for that kind of interesting styling.

Picturing them as real people makes it worse.

HANNAH: I think so too. Yeah.

MADDY: OK, what's your final thought to leave us with? It can be a scene, one more scene we didn't talk about, that really kind of made the hair on your arms raise. Or, at what point in the book were you like, "Oh no. Oh no. Oh no." Like, how early did that hit you? Was there a specific scene or sentence?

HANNAH: For me, I saw him starting to fall apart at chapter seventeen when it says, "He no longer cares if the female escapes. He no longer cares if Cecilia comes back."

And I think that's when he kind of begins to give up on everything, which leads to him then doing what he does and killing her. And I kind of saw that as the beginning of the fall. The whole thing is really his fall.

MADDY: Yeah. For such a long time we think that we are just seeing it through his eyes. And then the last half, it's really about, it's still us seeing how it breaks down, how we might break down. I feel like I was reading this at work one day, and when I started it, oh, page twenty-two in chapter three, "on the way to the exit they pass the barn where the impregnated females are kept. Some are in cages. Others lie on the table. They have no arms or legs."

It was just like, that visual was just like, OK, we're in it now. We are. There's no turning back. It's just going to get worse from here.

HANNAH: The visuals are really, really shocking. That's kind of the main thing. But beyond that, I think it is a great commentary on classes and the way women are viewed in society, and our actual society right now as well.

MADDY: It doesn't ask a lot of you to make the jump from where we are now to this book, which is terrifying.

HANNAH: Yeah. Or makes it even easier, honestly.

MADDY: Yeah, it does. You are, at least something is different. Just this one extra piece makes it a little more palatable or easier to wrap your head around.

Thanks, Hannah!

HANNAH: Thanks so much. This was fun.

MADDY: Good!

MUSIC

Thank you for listening to this very visceral episode of APL Volumes, Season One.

You can find a list of all the media we discussed in the show notes, and copies of them are available to borrow through the Austin Public Library. If you want even more recommendations check out our personal pick service and get a personalized list from our expert librarians.

Thanks to my guest Hannah Shepherd. If you see her out on the floor here at the Central Library, ask them what they ate for lunch.

APL Volumes is recorded and produced in the Library's Innovation Lab, a part of the APL Innovate Digital Makerspace. The Austin Public Library is currently putting together a very cool digital makerspace, which will offer not only recording equipment and hardware, but all kinds of audiovisual software for 3D modeling, graphic design, animation and much more. We are really excited to bring it to the public, so keep an eye out for it in the future.

Many thanks to the APL Innovate team for their guidance and input on this podcast.

A big thank you to Peter Hofstad, APL senior publication specialist, for helping the marketing and editing of Volumes, to Michael Wheat, one of APL's graphic designers, for our fantastic logo, and to Stephen Plail, my adult service coworker and a member of the APL Innovate team, for our theme song and for being the recording wizard.

This podcast is all library, all the time.

This episode is the last one of this season of APL Volumes. Subscribe to Volumes, follow APL on all the socials, and sign up for the Austin Public Library newsletter to find out when the next season drops. We've got a lot of fun ideas coming down the pike and we can't wait to share them with you.

Until then, thank you for listening and for supporting your local public library.

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END TRANSCRIPT