

Who Gets to Be the Hero? Sebastian Grey on Merry Band of Misfits and the Fight to Center Disabled Characters

Disability Deep Dive – Episode 110

Keith Casebonne (00:00:12):

Who gets to be the hero of a story? And what happens when a book puts disabled characters at the center but the publishing world still looks past them? Today, we're talking with Sebastian Grey about Merry Band of Misfits, a heist novel where disabled characters are not side characters, symbols, or lessons, they are the crew. They make the plan, they take the risk, and they drive the story. Today, we're joined by the two-person writing team behind Sebastian Grey, the debut author named for Merry Band of Misfits. The book follows Vinnie, a man with Down syndrome and his chosen family as they plan a bank heist to protect the home and life they have built together.

Jodi Beckstine (00:00:51):

They're joining us to talk openly about the book, their writing process, disability representation, and why it matters when disabled characters are treated as the heroes of their own stories. This is going to be a thoughtful and important conversation. Let's dive in.

Keith Casebonne (00:01:07):

Before we jump in, I'm Keith, a white man with brown hair and eyes, a graying beard, and I'm wearing a black shirt.

Jodi Beckstine (00:01:13):

And I'm Jodi, a white woman with dark blonde hair and braids, and I'm wearing a black shirt.

Keith Casebonne (00:01:18):

Sebastians, if you're comfortable, we'd love to invite you both to visually describe yourselves to our listeners as well.

Sebastian Grey (00:01:24):

Absolutely. We're the married writing team that is Sebastian Grey. I am a tall, white male with brown hair and green eyes?

Sebastian Grey (00:01:33):

Blue eyes.

Sebastian Grey (00:01:33):

Blue eyes. Sorry, my wife knows better than me. Mildly athletic build, but not a superhero.

Sebastian Grey (00:01:42):

I am a mixed half Black, half Chinese woman with curly brown hair, brown eyes, tan skin.

Sebastian Grey (00:01:55):

I think that's about it.

Sebastian Grey (00:01:56):

Yeah, That's how we physically look. Wearing a blue shirt. I forgot I am wearing a blue shirt-

Sebastian Grey (00:01:59):

We actually both wear blue-

Sebastian Grey (00:02:00):

I'm navy blue. You're kind of like a royal blue.

Jodi Beckstine (00:02:05):

Coordinated.

Keith Casebonne (00:02:06):

Awesome. Yeah. Yeah. The house are both in black, the guests are both in blue. Look at that.

Jodi Beckstine (00:02:10):

There you go.

Keith Casebonne (00:02:11):

Amazing. Very good. Well, thanks for that. So to start us off, go ahead and introduce yourselves to our listeners. Share a little bit about who you are, your work, and what led you to write Merry Band of Misfits.

Sebastian Grey (00:02:24):

We are the married writing team that is Sebastian Grey. The two of us come out of film and television, and we've written and produced together for a long time. And Merry Band of Misfits is our debut novel that centers disabled characters as a protagonist of their own story.

Sebastian Grey (00:02:39):

And we've been telling stories that center characters with disabilities since our USC film days. Her thesis film, which I co-wrote, it was a short about a group of guys and girls playing Dungeons and Dragons. And one of the leads was a young man with muscular dystrophy, and he was the criminal mastermind who plotted everything. He microwaved the dice and got bubbles in him and cut it all up. He won the whole game. And the short won Comic-Con and Gen Con in 2012. And that's kind of a principle that this novel was built on, a disabled character as the lead strategist. And we proved it on screen before we ever wrote a word.

Sebastian Grey (00:03:18):

Yeah. And what led us to write the novel is simpler than it sounds. We're both neurodivergent, and we spent years watching disabled characters get used as growth opportunities for someone else, the brother who learns, the wife who copes, the teachers who transformed. Meanwhile, these characters sit in the corner being inspirational.

Sebastian Grey (00:03:37):

And who wants to be that guy sitting in the corner? Do you want to be an extra? No. Everybody's their own story. So that's why we wrote Merry Band of Misfits. We wanted to show people that don't ever see themselves as the hero of their own stories, even though they are, as the heroes of their own stories.

Sebastian Grey (00:03:53):

Yes.

Keith Casebonne (00:03:54):

Yeah, I kind of love that. Wonderful.

Jodi Beckstine (00:03:57):

And you hit the nail on the head, one of the strongest ideas in the book is that disabled characters aren't there to teach a lesson to the non-disabled characters, they are the protagonists. They make choices and shape the story. So why was it important for you to build the story that way from the beginning?

Sebastian Grey (00:04:15):

You want me to go this-

Sebastian Grey (00:04:15):

Yeah, you can go ahead.

Sebastian Grey (00:04:16):

Okay. Well, working in TV and television, you learn the power of representation really fast. And let me kind of explain that. As I stated, I'm a white male. I grew up watching TV, and movies, and films, and everything with every white male lead that looked exactly like me. So if I wanted to see a chef, or a cop, or a lawyer, or an astronaut, whatever, there was always somebody representing me that I could look to and say, "Oh, that's completely possible." So I grew up believing I could do anything because I saw everybody look like me doing everything. Now, that's a very powerful thing to believe in yourself so completely that everything seems possible, that there are no limits. And that is the true power of representation. It gives you confidence. It gives you bravery. It gives you the permission to imagine yourself as the hero of your own story and not the extra in someone else's movie.

(00:05:06):

And like I said a second ago, we wanted to give that same confidence to other people. The people who don't ever see themselves on screen, or in movies, or as heroes. And the people get overlooked, ignored, and marginalized because, I mean, go out in the world, you see people with disabilities everywhere. Why aren't we seeing more on film and television? And that's something we kind of wanted to address and change.

Sebastian Grey (00:05:31):

Yeah. Even if you're not born with a disability, there are tons of people who will acquire a disability over the course of their life. And it's going to be through happenstance, through disease, whatever. These stories are universal. They should be told, we shouldn't be hiding them. They shouldn't be invisible.

Sebastian Grey (00:05:48):

Yeah.

Keith Casebonne (00:05:49):

Two things that came to mind when you answered that. First of all, that might be the best definition of representation I've heard. And we talk about representation all the time. So that was a great way of putting it. I love that. That really nailed it. And then the other thing I thought about was how... you mentioned disability, a lot of people will end up having a disability later. We talk about that too, where disability is the one, if you want to call it a demographic, but the one thing that doesn't matter your age, your gender, your race, your religion, your ethnicity, none of those things, disability is there, and can be there for any of those people and any of those economic status, et cetera, like rich or poor. And it gets overlooked for some strange reason, even though it's the broadest demographic, in a sense, that everybody is either connected, has it, will have it. It's incredible.

(00:06:49):

Yeah. So Vinnie, the main character of the story, has Down syndrome. And he is funny, and he is strategic, and he's romantic, stubborn, and incredibly capable. So how did you approach writing him as a full adult character without flattening him into either an inspirational figure or someone defined only by other people's care?

Sebastian Grey (00:07:16):

I kind of grew up with a friend who had Down syndrome. And so I got to live with that for a very long time. And so when I wrote Vinnie, I kind of already knew Vinnie in my head. I'd been carrying him for many years. And how I wrote him and wanted to write him as adult is I think the main thing and the important thing with Vinnie is that Vinnie is just Vinnie. I never thought of Vinnie as Vinnie with Down syndrome. It was just Vinnie. Of course, he has Down syndrome, but he also has a love of cooking, he also has a love of his girlfriend. That doesn't define him. It's part of him, but it's not the definition of him. And so that's how we approached Vinnie, and actually, all the misfits in the book. When you're a writer, you... I don't want to bogart this.

Sebastian Grey (00:08:00):

No. When you're a writer, we all train ourselves to get inside the heads of the characters. So when we built Vinnie, we did what we do for every character we ever create. We got in our heads, figured out what he liked, what he disliked, what he wanted in life, what he didn't want, his wants and needs. That was our approach, and I think it worked very, very

well. And for me, Vinnie, the character himself, is a man who lives his truth. He's playing a heist. Yes, he has to keep secrets about Heist Club, but in every aspect of his life, you know where Vinnie stands because he tells you where he stands. There's no subterfuge, there's no games. And I think if everyone lived like Vinnie does, the world would be a much better place. We don't have to try and figure out what somebody means or wants in whatever situation. It's like, "No, I'll just tell you this is exactly what I need and want," and we don't have to beat around the bush.

Sebastian Grey (00:08:52):

Or pay attention... or to pay copious attention to social contracts that slow everything down. And some of them are good, but some of them aren't, and Vinnie cuts through that. If he doesn't like something, he tells you. If he likes something, he tells you that. And there's no malice behind that. It is, like she said, truth. It's just him being honest.

Sebastian Grey (00:09:11):

Yes. He's a truth teller.

Jodi Beckstine (00:09:12):

The heist genre is usually built around skill, and timing, and planning, and surprise. And in your book, the disabled characters are not written around the heist, their perspective is how the heist works. So did the heist format allow you to say something about disability that a quieter, more traditional story might not have been able to do?

Sebastian Grey (00:09:35):

I think it definitely did. The world looks at disabled people, and I think, again, just my opinion, but I think the question that almost is probably from first or second is what can't they do? What are their limitations? In a heist movie or a heist book, the only question is what can you do, and can you do it under pressure? Nobody's teaching a lesson. Nobody's there to inspire anybody during the heist. Everybody has a very specific job and it has to get done. Period. There's no asking for help when you need it, it's just you to hit it right on the head.

Sebastian Grey (00:10:09):

You're the muscle, you're the safecracker, you're the wheelman. But it just you contribute or you don't, and things go off.

Sebastian Grey (00:10:17):

If we'd have written this in a quieter story like has been done before, for instance, if we'd have written a slice of life, like this is us, then the disabilities we feel would've become the subject, and that would've overridden... It would've eclipsed the entire story and the point we're trying to make. The plot would've been totally about coping, and about acceptance, and a family learning to love each other across differences. And all those stories have been written. But as you've said, a lot of those characters are flattened, and that they're inspiration, and they're secondary, and we don't want to do that. And furthermore, to answer your question further, the heist doesn't allow you to do that. They have to step up or it fails. And the heist requires a disabled character to be useful. As she said, Garth has his strength, Floyd's incredible tech matters.

(00:11:05):

William's masking gets them out of danger. Vinnie's strategic mind matters. And Vinnie's even the one who saw the heist in its entirety and got the idea in the beginning. So the question isn't what can't they do? The question is what can they do, and are they a good enough crew to pull it off? And that's kind of why we wanted to do it as a heist movie and not an action movie, or an escape movie, or something like that. And it also helps with their skills. The one thing you think about in a sort of burglar Oceans movie, every character has a specific skill, and a specific part and a role to play, and they all have quirky personalities. And we are like that-

Sebastian Grey (00:11:44):

Fits what our disabled characters would be. They all have quirky personalities and they'll get to-

Keith Casebonne (00:11:52):

Yeah. Yeah.

Sebastian Grey (00:11:53):

Which was a lot of fun to do. And also, because it's a heist, heist movies are all morally ambiguous, right?

Keith Casebonne (00:12:00):

Very true. Very true.

Sebastian Grey (00:12:03):

So our disabled characters have to deal with the same dilemma like everyone else. Mainstream stories, for some reason, with disabled characters, they don't get to have those discussions. Most disabled stories live in the pure positive, the pure goodness, pure trauma space. That's not human. Humans are fallible. We make good and bad decisions. We make good and bad choices. We make tons of mistakes. And we wanted to give our characters a chance to make those decisions and choices, make mistakes, learn and grow like any mainstream character would.

Jodi Beckstine (00:12:36):

Absolutely.

Keith Casebonne (00:12:37):

For sure. And the novel's better for it, for sure.

Jodi Beckstine (00:12:39):

Yeah.

Sebastian Grey (00:12:41):

Yeah. And we also think acquired story would have asked the audience to feel for this character. The heist asks the audience to root for these characters.

Keith Casebonne (00:12:51):

Right. Oh, that's a great distinction. Yeah, that's a good point.

Jodi Beckstine (00:12:53):

They're not the same thing.

Sebastian Grey (00:12:56):

I think the difference with how we approach our novel is a lot of disability stories approached, like you said, with wanting you to feel. And they do make you feel, but it's like watching *The Elephant Man*, you're suffering with him. We wanted it to be more of a *Rocky* movie where you're inspired, you want to go punch the screen, and you want to go help them and do it. The heist that-

Sebastian Grey (00:13:16):

Yeah, you want to be part of that heist.

Keith Casebonne (00:13:20):

Yeah. Yeah. No, for sure. Wow. Well, okay, let's turn our attention and talk just for a moment about the Kirkus Reviews. So you guys have spoken out about the review as an example of a larger pattern, because the review, it didn't name any key disabilities in the book, it shifted the attention toward Nicholas, who's the only non-disabled major character. Can you tell us a little bit more about the review, and what do you think that response reveals about how disabled characters are often read, reviewed, or overlooked?

Sebastian Grey (00:13:54):

First off, we need to say that the Kirkus review wasn't a bad review. It wasn't. We could handle a bad review. The Kirkus review wasn't erasure, it was just like you said, it named Nicholas as the only main character who keeps the family together. It didn't mention Down syndrome, not even once. And then later in the review, it said that Vinnie's life, his cooking was a detour. All of his restaurant stuff was just a detour that needed to be excised to speed it up. It called Garth, our Special Olympics champion, it called him a Special Olympics champion who can't hear. Well, that's really dismissive. Garth is deaf. He's part of a community. He has his own language. That's a big deal. William, who I'm part and parcel to, I have autism, he has autism and he masks Mr. Darcy. And there's a whole reason for that and it's all psychological. And the review simply said he had OCD and was obsessed with Pride and Prejudice. And I was like-

Sebastian Grey (00:14:47):

A fixation.

Sebastian Grey (00:14:48):

A fixation. So we were really floored when we got it because Kirkus Reviews is a big deal. They basically give the reviews that every bookstore... Anybody who buys the books is going to read that and order it based on their review. They've been around 100 years, they're very respected. And we were really, really waiting for that today-

Sebastian Grey (00:15:09):

Excited because we had already gotten a few early reviews from normal readers who just would put up the Goodreads review, and they were so glowing, they totally got what we were doing-

Sebastian Grey (00:15:20):

And they all saw Vinnie.

Sebastian Grey (00:15:21):

They all saw Vinnie as this main character whose voice they loved, and whose journey they loved. And so we were very, very hopeful for the Kirkus review. And then we got it, and for them to have erased all of the disability and to center the neurotypical brother, we were just like, "What happened in this read?"

Sebastian Grey (00:15:39):

Well, I told them what happened.

Sebastian Grey (00:15:40):

And it really hurt because it was like we took such care to give these characters full lives, and full experiences, and full story arcs, and they just negated all of that.

Sebastian Grey (00:15:51):

They didn't negate it, they did what mainstream has taught everyone to do. And I'll get on my white soapbox for a second. They taught them to see if you see the white male, then that's how he's the main character, and that person's going to save the day, and everything goes around him, and everybody supports that white male character. And Kirkus did that. And it was not only hurtful, but then when we told them about that, they of course hide behind their policy saying they will only correct inaccuracies. But we said, "Okay." So yeah, that really-

Sebastian Grey (00:16:18):

[inaudible 00:16:19].

Sebastian Grey (00:16:19):

Yeah, I tricked-

Keith Casebonne (00:16:20):

[inaudible 00:16:20].

Sebastian Grey (00:16:22):

... wrote eight full pages, and there were... Kirkus reviews are very short. We wrote eight type pages that dissected every sentence, and had pointed back to the book where they were wrong, where we said things where they were, and then their response was, "Okay, well, you know what? You're right. This doesn't fit our standards and we're going to give you

another review. We'll give it to you at the end of June." Well, our book launched in April, and this was April. They had a week to fix this. Granted, we understand that's tight, but we've also lost production days, and a script get thrown out the window by execs. And you sit there and you get it done. You just do it.

(00:16:59):

So we expected Kirkus would do that because it was their mess-up, and they even admitted it. And then we explained to them, "Look, that time window is unhelpful to us, because everyone's already going to have seen your review and they're going to pass on it. And furthermore, if you send a retraction, whoever hears those?" The papers print those, back in the day, on page 17. Nobody reads a retraction. It's that first statement that gets spread around the world. And that's what made us start reaching out, and that's what made us come out and do this. Because it is a pattern, it's a pattern of erasure. And well, they kind of proved our whole book. In our book, Merry Band of Misfits, Vinnie gets the idea to rob the bank, to run the heist, because he figures out that society has given all of the misfits a superpower. Society has made them invisible.

(00:17:50):

If they act the way society sees them to, they can get away with robbing a bank. And that's Vinnie's whole premise. And he convinces the family and proves it to them in a wonderful chapter. And Kirkus kind of did that to us, they kind of proved that-

Sebastian Grey (00:18:03):

You're invisible. It seems to stay invisible.

Sebastian Grey (00:18:06):

And what are you supposed to do with that? We were supposed to say, "Oh yes, thank you. You took our money, you gave us a bad review. You tanked a lot of viewership for the book, and then you're going to print a later review." And it's like, "No, just fix it now." And they simply would not. And so that's why we're here now, is to tell our story. Because the only weapon we have is our words and our voices. And if people don't fight back, then bullies never stop. That's just a common rule. And I think there's a lesson in the book where Nicholas even tells Vinnie, "It's an important thing to stand up to a bully. Even if you know you're going to lose, if you bloody their nose, they tend to look for smaller prey or they change their habits." Now, I'm not saying we wanted to bloody Kirkus' nose and make them look for smaller prey, but what we're trying to do is make sure that their reviews are up to their standards, because their name has a whole lot of weight.

(00:19:02):

Excuse me, go ahead. Didn't mean to take it over. But yeah, they really upset me because it is something that you do see in society and nobody wants to talk about it, is that we're all invisible, and we're all other people's problems. We're all someone else's issue to deal with. Or if I run into them, maybe they'll brighten up my day by giving me a lesson and inspiration. And no, that's not life, and we're really tired of it. It's really frustrating that even when you go out of your way to make something, to fight the establishment and the rules, that the most exonerated gatekeeper ended up being the biggest threshold guardian that's trying to stop you.

Sebastian Grey (00:19:47):

Yes. And it's also, if we don't fight back, how else... They can do this to another disabled writer, they could do this to another disabled story. We're hoping that if we can get the message out, they'll understand that when you don't actually accept the story for what it is, there are repercussions. And it's also hard for us because how does our community, the people we wrote the book for, how do they find this book when it says Nicholas, the typical caregiver, it is the one story we're following, which it's not-

Sebastian Grey (00:20:19):

That's how the review opens, "Nicholas is keeping the house together for years." And we're like, Nicholas, as we wrote to Kirkus... and there's a spoiler for the book, but Nicholas is our worried caregiver. He is typical. And he gets sidelined in the climax. As we wrote to Kirkus in one of our points, we were like-

Sebastian Grey (00:20:36):

Spoilers.

Sebastian Grey (00:20:36):

... "What author writes their own protagonist out of the climax? Why would we even do that? So why would you think Nicholas is?" Because he does... things happen, and it's very wonderful and scary and emotional. And that's another reason we're like, "Wow, that moment is such a big moment in the book, and they just completely glossed over it." It was almost like AI read it and reviewed it. That's what we felt, that Kirkus Reviews used AI to review our book, but we can't prove that.

Jodi Beckstine (00:21:04):

Yeah. All right. Merry Band of Misfits was published through Bastian House and Indie Press that you guys created. You said part of that came from the resistance to this kind of story in traditional publishing and entertainment. What barriers did you guys run into, and what made you decide the story still needed to exist on its own terms?

Sebastian Grey (00:21:24):

Well, our industry mocked us. That's the honest answer. We wrote this Merry Band of Misfits as a TV pilot in 2014. And we took it to our reps, one a major agency, another one in middling management team, and they would not even send the script out, but furthermore, they wouldn't even tell us they weren't sending the script out. Months went by that we thought that they were doing it, we wrote them a long four-page letter explaining how this was part and parcel to us, why this specific story was-

Sebastian Grey (00:21:56):

[inaudible 00:21:57].

Sebastian Grey (00:21:57):

Yes, we had ties to the community, and the reps basically said, "It's not your best work. We're not sending it out." And they wouldn't talk about it again. And then our management team, when I finally cornered them and got them on phone and said, "Well, why aren't you sending this out?" And it was then called something else. And he was just like... oh, I said, "Have you sent it out?" He was like, "No." And I was like, "Well, are you?"

Sebastian Grey (00:22:18):

Are you going to give us notes?

Sebastian Grey (00:22:22):

He says no. And then I said, "Well, were you going to tell us?" And this is what got him fired, he laughed right in our faces. He went, "No, we weren't going to tell you."

Sebastian Grey (00:22:29):

I was like, "What?"

Sebastian Grey (00:22:30):

And we were like, "Are you serious with this?"

Jodi Beckstine (00:22:32):

Wow. My God.

Sebastian Grey (00:22:33):

So it took a little while. We had to fire them in a time that was opportunist to us, but that's what really got it going. And the reasons they would give, if any, was that people with disabilities are too complicated for production. But they did not use those words, they used much harsher words. And we realized that even though, at that time, Hollywood was, "Oh, rah, rah, we're for the representation in everything in the world, underdog." Well-

Sebastian Grey (00:23:03):

They weren't ready for this.

Sebastian Grey (00:23:04):

They weren't ready for this. So we kind of put it in a drawer, like you do. We all have scripts, features and things that get passed on all the time. So you put it in the drawer, you move on, like we did. But since this story was so part and parcel to us, we knew we were going to get to it eventually. And then the real pivot was last couple years, our industry's completely collapsed. The contraction has been so bad that it's hard to make a living out here. It's a real industry. There's four or five shows. It's a small number of people working. And so what we did was we said, "Okay, we're going to pivot into novels." We always wanted to, but screenwriting paid a lot more and it's a lot easier. It's so much easier.

Sebastian Grey (00:23:46):

We have to figure out everything. You have a team, you're getting directors, production designers, costume designers to figure out everything. A script is just a skeleton of what it's going to become. So when you sit down to write a novel, there's a lot more detail you must put in.

Sebastian Grey (00:24:03):

Yeah. And it took us a couple of years to figure that out. We had to totally change from writing external, where the camera's your POV, to actually having the POV of a character and the thoughts. And all of a sudden, it was a whole different deal. And the story really exploded and got super layered once we made... It took us a little while to master that. For any other screenwriters out there who want to be novelists, here's a small tip or a big tip for us, perspective. We don't think about it, the camera's perspective. We literally don't think about it when we write a-

Sebastian Grey (00:24:35):

What does a camera scene?

Sebastian Grey (00:24:36):

But as a novelist, perspective is everything. Everything is seen through it, everything experienced through it, just everything. And it's a very hard thing to learn that's the end-all be-all of the creation. And once we did that, we got it. And so we started writing this.

Sebastian Grey (00:24:54):

Yeah. And we wanted our debut novel to be something really original, and fun, and funny. And we wanted it because the world was in such a bad place when we started writing this. We just wanted it to be full of joy. We needed the joy in our lives, and we needed to bring it to the world at the same time. So it's something that... We injected happiness back into the world. And it was fun to write. It was fun living through those characters.

Sebastian Grey (00:25:19):

And we created it through Bastian House because, as we told you with the agents, we'd already seen what gatekeepers said and did. And actually, a couple of people... because we kept getting colleagues and whatnot to read the pilot back in the day, and several of them did the same exact thing and made Nicholas the main character. And I actually got in a fight with a writer about it. Again, Kirkus the thing, somebody telling you who their main character is. And it's like, "No, I wrote it. I know who the main character is." So-

Sebastian Grey (00:25:48):

[inaudible 00:25:49] identify with is completely separate from who the actual main character is. So that is a distinction that we've had to make with people. It's like just because you identify with them and you can see that perspective doesn't mean that that is that person's story. That is your experience through the story, but it's not the story.

Sebastian Grey (00:26:08):

So we published it ourselves, and created Bastion House, and wrote the book. And that way, we can control the message, we can control how it gets out. And again, like I said with my manager, nobody's going to laugh in our faces. And then all of a sudden, Kirkus laughs in our faces and slams the door. So that's why we're here. We want to make sure that these kinds of stories aren't so difficult to tell. People shouldn't have to ask permission from anybody, especially a gatekeeper to the industry that thrives on this kind of work, for permission to write a story about this. It is normal. It is life. It is just what's everywhere out there. And to have a gatekeeper be so stringently controlling to keep that perspective

down, we didn't care for that. So that's why we knew that we went to a book agent that they were going to try to make Nicholas the main character, and we weren't going to fight that anymore. So that's kind of why we did our own route.

Sebastian Grey (00:27:06):

Yeah, we stopped asking for permission. I was like, "We don't need to ask permission to tell this story." And we found joy in that.

Jodi Beckstine (00:27:14):

Right on. Awesome.

Keith Casebonne (00:27:17):

Good. Excellent.

Jodi Beckstine (00:27:17):

It's awesome.

Keith Casebonne (00:27:19):

Well, so Sebastian Grey began as a pen name for the two of you, partly, so you could keep your TV and film work separate from this book and protect your privacy. But after the Kirkus review, you said staying behind the pen name no longer felt possible in the same way. So what changed for you, and how did you decide that this was the moment to speak more publicly while still protecting your private lives?

Sebastian Grey (00:27:44):

Really, it was just the Kirkus review. If Kirkus is allowed to erase our stories without a fight, it means they can do the same thing, like we said, to another disabled author. Yeah-

Sebastian Grey (00:27:54):

They're the authorities. And if the authorities are stopping you, well then you have to fight or submit. Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you.

Sebastian Grey (00:28:01):

No, it's all good. If we fight back and let people know what has occurred, perhaps another story will have an easier time through the process. The people before us have taken incredibly hard steps to be able to get to where we are today. We are going to have to take the same kinds of steps because nothing's really changed. We've given them different

names and said, "Oh yes, we accept this," but they don't really do the work to do the acceptance of it. So we're just going to keep fighting these issues, and hopefully, the job is easier for the people behind us.

Sebastian Grey (00:28:32):

Yeah, we're of the opinion that if you think the world sucks, go out and try to fix it. If you think Kirkus dissed you, tell them about it. And if you think disabled character deserve to be the hero of their own stories, buy the books, watch the movies, or write them yourselves. Get out there and get it. Fighting is the only way that anything changes. It's sad that our society has gotten so obsessed with socials and that typing into this void is going to change something. And I think that might be something that big corporations have trained us to do because they don't want us protesting like in the '60s. They don't want that big noise-

Sebastian Grey (00:29:10):

They don't see the faces.

Sebastian Grey (00:29:10):

Yes. Yeah. So we have to fight. For instance, I'm going to make up a company, if Corgan Screw makes corks, if you don't like the way that Corgan Screw is treating their cork workers, well then organize and cancel your subscription to Corgan View. And you know what? If a bunch of people did that, if a bunch of people banded together and stood up and fought and said, "Hey, Corgan View, we don't like the way you're treating your workers. We're not buying your stuff until you fix it," they fix like that, so would Amazon. And any corporation in the world is at the mercy of its consumers. And somewhere in the past 15 to 20 years, that's gotten really confused, and I don't think people understand that you do have to fight. So you can't just scroll past it, which is what I think a lot of people do now.

(00:29:58):

They see the bad things and they can scroll past them and it's done for them, they don't have to think about it. And then the next news cycles comes in and replaces it. You got to stop scrolling, and you got to sit in your uncomfortableness. And sometimes, you are going to have to suffer to get your point made. And that's what I mean, like canceling subscriptions, not going to a movie, and I'm making all these things up, but actual things you can do to hurt them economically. Because in a capitalistic society, the only way to exact change is to make economic pain. And that's what you have to do. You have to say, "Hey, we don't like what you're doing, and we're not going to buy your product until it does."

And if everybody did that, they would do it. So even though we didn't want to do this, this is us doing it.

Sebastian Grey (00:30:35):

Yeah. But it's also putting, if we were using Sebastian Grey, you saw no face, you saw our cat-

Sebastian Grey (00:30:41):

It's what we're going to do.

Sebastian Grey (00:30:43):

You would see specific things that don't allow people to get behind the message. When they understand that there's a person behind the pen name, and that there is a human being who has to fight and struggle, and find joy and happiness and live in this world, it changes how they see the injustice that has occurred, and that maybe they want to fight with us. Maybe they'll read the book just to see... Honestly, we're not doing this for the money. Yes, money is nice, but I would give this book away for free. I would just say, "Here, go read it, have joy, give it to your family members, they might find it amusing, and that you can have something to share and talk about this thing with." We just want to have those stories out in the world without constantly having to do this battle. But we'll battle. We battle every day-

Sebastian Grey (00:31:33):

But we have to.

Sebastian Grey (00:31:34):

... that is our industry.

Sebastian Grey (00:31:35):

The sad thing is that we have to fight, and we have to make noise, or you just get ridden over by a faceless corporation. And that's what keeps that status quo so status quo-y. That's a terrible sentence. But they don't like change. This is big change.

Sebastian Grey (00:31:55):

Kirkus Reviews especially is like when we talked to them, they were like, "Oh, we just started the... Your book started so many conversations about how reviews are done." It's like, "Why is our book the start of a conversation about disability?"

Sebastian Grey (00:32:08):

Actually, it's a little more sinister than that. Their last email to us was from a different person. We've been emailing someone named Katerina, and then this different person emailed us the last time and started out with saying she was from the LGBTQ community, "We're in like circles, we're fighting the same fight, and here, let me tell you why what we did isn't bad." And we were just like, "So now you're playing the LGBTQ card and trying to get us to..." It's like, we told them, and then that was the person who said, "You've started so many conversations." We replied to them and he was like, "Well, you're Kirkus Reviews. Why weren't these conversations happening years ago? And furthermore, you're Kirkus Reviews, why weren't these... One, why wasn't this fixed the moment you knew you had made the error? Which you admitted to in the emails."

(00:32:56):

And that's what we found that we had to fight, is that if they were just to say, "Hey, we'll give you that late review," miss your book window, well, that's just kind of a shrug of, "Oh well, we kind of messed up your stuff and we don't care." And when people shrug something away, they never changed or adjust their behavior. And this behavior needs adjusting. And so-

Sebastian Grey (00:33:19):

Use another underrepresentative community to try to force us into seeing things their way. It's like, that's just so wrong on so many levels. I get it, we all are fighting similar fights, but this was a very specific fight, and we told you exactly what needed to be done and what you did.

Sebastian Grey (00:33:39):

I'll quote Jurassic Park, "I don't blame people for their mistakes, but I do expect them to fix them." And that's where we are with Kirkus. We're hurt, we're not mad, but we just wanted it to be fixed, and they didn't. So well, we're going to fight them and make noise about it. So hopefully, other people don't.

Keith Casebonne (00:33:57):

Yeah. Wow. Wow.

Jodi Beckstine (00:34:03):

Well, before we wrap up, we have a second segment that we call The Deep Cut where we talk about media and disability spaces. So we always ask our guest, is there a book, film,

TV show, song, besides your own work, that has shaped how you think about disability and storytelling or who gets to be seen as the hero?

Sebastian Grey (00:34:22):

You want me to go first? Mine's a little controversial. In 1996... I used to manage movie theaters. 1996, we got this movie in called Sling Blade, and I had to put the print together and watch it by myself. So I'm watching Sling Blade, and I'm thinking it's like 2:00 in the morning, you just want to go home. And you're not expecting it to be good. I didn't know anything about the movie at the time. It blew me away. Karl Childers is disabled, and he is the protagonist of that story. He is the heart and soul of that story. And in fact, every typical he comes in contact within that movie is crueler, less adjusted, and more lost than Karl is. And Karl, they do not shy away from Karl. Karl is funny, Karl is sad, Karl is sometimes scary, but Karl is also ferociously protective of his found family.

(00:35:06):

And that showed me, I remember sitting in that theater, the whole thing, the whole thing is, I don't want to ruin it if you haven't seen it, if you go watch, it holds up. I watched it a couple of months ago. It is a Greek's tragedy set in the South. And Karl Childers is a disabled man who goes on this almost Oedipus-like story that solves with him... he takes on a wonderfully beautiful and terrible burden to save the people he loves. And he goes off into the sunset to live like that. And when I watched that movie, I remember leaving it going, "My God, I think that's the first movie with disability that didn't shy away from any of the gray of the area life or even the bad parts of life." And it celebrated him, but more importantly, it was about him.

(00:35:49):

Karl had the agency. Karl makes a decision to save his surrogate brother, son, whatever you want to call the boy, and take on the big responsibility to save him himself. Nobody gives him that idea. He decides to go back to the institution at the end because the world is too loud for him and it didn't make sense, and he's fine with that. It is his decision. Nobody said in this movie anywhere, you have to do this, that, and the other. And it really clearly stuck with me for this long. And a shout-out to Billy Bob Thornton who wrote, produced, and directed it because he had to, because no one was going to make a movie about a man like Karl Childers who killed his family with a sling blade and then goes through this arc of redemption, and he had to do it himself. There's a lot of... Merry Band of Misfits is standing on the shoulders of movies like that. That's mine anyways.

Sebastian Grey (00:36:40):

Yes. And that's also casting disabled actors, as we've moved forward in time, has become much, much easier. In the past, even when I was doing my thesis film, even though we hired a casting director and I'm a student, I was a student at the time, and you couldn't afford to spend inordinate amount of time looking for new actors-

Sebastian Grey (00:37:02):

Yeah, because you had a schedule.

Sebastian Grey (00:37:03):

... you had a schedule you had get through because you're finishing school. We could not find a disabled actor to play our character with muscular dystrophy. And so we had to cast a typical person. But we tried, we looked.

Sebastian Grey (00:37:14):

We tried really hard.

Sebastian Grey (00:37:14):

We tried really, really hard.

Sebastian Grey (00:37:16):

And then literally, the last second, this wonderful actor came in who actually took it seriously and he gave a performance that, granted, it's a student film and it's dated, it's from-

Sebastian Grey (00:37:28):

2012.

Sebastian Grey (00:37:29):

2012. It's a long time ago, but he gave the representation that I wanted. Because I had gone to LSU and other colleges and played Dungeon & Dragons and role-playing games, and a lot of the people I played with were disabled, and one even had muscular dystrophy. So the character of Scotty was someone I knew and played games with for years. So again, like Vinnie, I still had his voice in my head so I could hear it clearly, and we were able to direct this wonderful actor.

Sebastian Grey (00:37:57):

Yeah, sorry, that's a sidetrack.

Sebastian Grey (00:38:02):

Your Deep Cut.

Sebastian Grey (00:38:03):

Yeah, it was a Deep Cut. My Deep Cut is a book called Starless by Jacqueline Carey. It's this sweeping epic fantasy, and at the heart of it is a princess named Zariya who has a physical disability, and she uses crutches. Her mobility is limited, but her body is part of the story from page one. What really struck me is that Carey doesn't write her as someone who needs to be healed, or overcome, anything, for it to matter to the story. Zariya, she is one of the chosen ones in a fantasy story. So the prophecy includes her, her body and all. She's not the sidekick to the able-bodied hero, she is the hero alongside Khai. And here's a part that really got me when I read the book, is her disability was never magically fixed. Because in fantasy, for some reason, we love to magically fix disabilities.

(00:39:00):

Like you find some... Yeah, even sci-fi, you find some magical way or some technology way to get around the issue, and there's no healing spring, or God's blessing, or some artifact that restores her walking. It's just like, no, she lets it live as who this character is. And Zariya, she still saves the world with her disability, and that is a beautiful thing to me. Her disability doesn't limit her as a character, and the narrative doesn't treat it as something that needs to be solved. I love the stories. It's-

Sebastian Grey (00:39:34):

Jacqueline did a good job. Jacqueline said that she... Jacqueline Carey's the author, that she reached out to the community to talk about this. And there is a wonderful part in the book where the princess gets this chance to eat these... I forget what they were called, the magic berries seeds, and there's a chance it might heal her legs and restore everything, and it doesn't. And Jacqueline made sure to put that in there to fight against this trope of-

Sebastian Grey (00:39:58):

Well, we can instantly heal an injury that will never be healed.

Sebastian Grey (00:40:02):

Yeah, instead of just accept.

Sebastian Grey (00:40:04):

Yeah, because people are going to have to accept it. And then there's the romance, because there is one. They never treat her body as an obstacle to being desired or a full participant in her own life. And that sounds like such a low bar, but how often do we actually see it? A disabled woman at the center of a destiny narrative written with desire, and agency, and political weight and not pity?

Sebastian Grey (00:40:29):

Yeah, it's a good book. If we had to shout other ones... We also love Born This Way for obvious reasons... well, not obvious reasons. We loved Born This Way back in the day on ABC Family because it did not shy away from not putting subtitles in the ASL. It lets you feel the community. It lets you become part of the... When they were talking to each other, they were talking ASL. I think there's even one episode-

Sebastian Grey (00:40:54):

... talking about Born This Way.

Sebastian Grey (00:40:56):

No, sorry, I messed it up. Switched at Birth. Oh my God. I hope you can edit that out. Born This Way is next on the topic. Sorry. I'm stupid. Switched at Birth. I'm so sorry if I confused or insulted any fans out there. Switched at Birth is one of them that was our favorite. And then of course, Born This Way showed us that there was a real modern audience. I think that show ran six years and won a bunch of Emmys, and we were like, "Boom, that's one..." And then Love on the Spectrum is another one that, in our sequel to Merry Band of Misfits, we're going to explore that with William and Sophie, is this he has to find love while he's simultaneously pulling off another heist.

Sebastian Grey (00:41:36):

But Switched at Birth was great because I think it was at a time when we were actually doing my thesis, and it showed us like, "No, you can show disability on television and be true to it." Even though that show has its problems, like every show, we were just happy that somebody was taking the chance. That's a huge chance that ABC Family/Freeform now took, and it was brilliant to see and gave us the courage to go out and do it ourselves.

Sebastian Grey (00:42:01):

And there's so so few shows like it.

Sebastian Grey (00:42:03):

There are.

Sebastian Grey (00:42:04):

Yeah. Which we're hoping to change.

Keith Casebonne (00:42:06):

Yeah, no, for sure.

Jodi Beckstine (00:42:09):

Absolutely. Great choices. Yeah. Well, I wanted to thank you both so much for joining us. This was such an amazing conversation.

Sebastian Grey (00:42:16):

Thank you.

Sebastian Grey (00:42:16):

Thank you.

Keith Casebonne (00:42:17):

We really appreciate the chance to talk to you about Merry Band of Misfits, disabled characters as protagonists, and where it matters when stories are seen more clearly wonderful. Thank you guys so very much-

Sebastian Grey (00:42:29):

[inaudible 00:42:28] for giving us a voice and-

Sebastian Grey (00:42:29):

... and allowing us to tell our story.

Sebastian Grey (00:42:31):

Yes. Very much appreciated.

Jodi Beckstine (00:42:34):

Absolutely.

Keith Casebonne (00:42:36):

Stay tuned. This week's Deep Cut is coming up. Today's Deep Cut, we're talking about Merry Band of Misfits by Sebastian Grey. This book is part comedy, part heist story, part family drama, and part love letter to a found family. At the center is Vinnie, a man with Down syndrome and a gift for cooking, and a twin brother Nicholas who worries about him constantly. Vinnie knows, quote, "Typical people underestimate him, and that becomes part of the story's power."

Jodi Beckstine (00:43:11):

And Vinnie lives with his chosen family, Nicholas, his twin brother and caregiver, Garth, a powerlifter who is deaf, Floyd, a wheelchair user and a lightning strike survivor with a brilliant engineering mind, and William, a man with autism who uses Mr. Darcy from Pride and Prejudice to help him navigate a world that often feels overwhelming. Together, they've built a home rooted in love, a little bit of routines and chaos, and unending support.

Keith Casebonne (00:43:38):

Yeah. And when that home is threatened, the family faces the possibility of being separated. So they come up with a very risky plan, a bank heist, carried out by the very people society keeps underestimating.

Jodi Beckstine (00:43:51):

That premise is funny and outrageous on the surface, but underneath, the story is about disability, autonomy, caregiving, community living, and what happens when people who are overlooked decide they're done being invisible.

Keith Casebonne (00:44:03):

So today, we're looking at how the book portrays disability, caregiving, independence, chosen family, and the harm that happens when people with disabilities are underestimated or denied control over their own lives. So one of the first things that stands out is that disabled characters are not defined only by their disabilities. They have jobs and relationships, routines, talents, frustrations, and they really each have very different personalities. So how do you feel the book handled disability as part of identity without making it the whole identity?

Jodi Beckstine (00:44:37):

Oh, one of the things I think the book does very well is that it introduces disability clearly. It's right there on the page, but it doesn't stop there. For instance, Vinnie tells us right off the bat he has Down syndrome, but immediately, we find out that he loves cooking, and

that he misses his mother, and he has a wonderful sense of humor, and he gets annoyed by his brother. These are things that are so beyond just his disability. So he's not this walking diagnosis that's going through the plot. He's a person with a full inner life. And that's true for all of the family and the cast of characters.

Keith Casebonne (00:45:22):

Yeah. The representation I think is really strong because the characters, like we said, they have all these different facets to their personalities. They're allowed to be funny, and angry, loving, scared, and sometimes clever, sometimes wrong. Again, it's just sort of the same human condition that we all experience. Just because someone has disability doesn't make them some emotionless unintellectual automaton or something. We're all human, we're all the same under the hood.

Jodi Beckstine (00:45:54):

Yeah. And they didn't go too far in the opposite direction. They didn't just put it out there and ignore it. It shaped how the characters moved through the book. They did not make it the only thing that we know about them, but it's still present. That wouldn't be very honest to kind of just, "Okay, here it is," and then ignore it. So the strongest part was that it's present there, but each character's personhood came before that and all the complications that comes with that. So it made the characters really feel real to me, and I appreciated that.

Keith Casebonne (00:46:32):

100%. Yeah, I agree.

Jodi Beckstine (00:46:35):

So Vinnie's perspective is central to the book. He's not just someone other characters talk about or care about, he helps shape the entire story. What impact does that have on how you think readers may understand him?

Keith Casebonne (00:46:50):

Yeah. I think his point of view gives readers access... well, clearly, it gives access to his thoughts, and feelings, and humor, and logic. But what I think is great is that readers don't only see him through a caregiver's eyes, they experience him as he is. And I think this matters so much, because people with intellectual disabilities, like Vinnie has, are so often portrayed from an outside view, or someone else's opinion, or someone else's perception.

Rarely do they get portrayed from their own internal thoughts. They're not usually the narrator. They're not usually leading the story.

Jodi Beckstine (00:47:42):

I think having him be the main narrator of this story allows readers to move from just watching his experience to actually listening to him explain his experience and show his life and show his memories, especially through cooking. He doesn't just like food. He has this experience with cooking from memories of his mom moving all the way through the skills that it's taught him to be a cook. And I think that's just really important, and they did that really well.

Keith Casebonne (00:48:19):

Yeah, I think so too. And with the cooking too, he cared about the quality, he wanted to advance his skills. It wasn't just, "Hey, I like cooking," and he threw something in the microwave and, "look what I made." It was much deeper than that, and I appreciated that. So Nicholas is the caregiver, but he's also a brother. He's Vinnie's brother. So his love for the family is clear, but the book also shows how complicated caregiving can become. Where did you see the difference between supporting someone and controlling the situation for them?

Jodi Beckstine (00:48:58):

Yeah. Nicholas is one of the more complicated parts of the book for me because he has this deep love. It's not a pretending to care or just having plain empathy, human emotions. He's built his entire life around protecting Vinnie, and now the rest of the family. And you see that in his daily routines, how he manages medication, and bills, and bedtime, and things like that. In the book, they don't flatten that, but again, it's not about him also, it's about Vinnie and the family. But it shows how much caregiving involves. Not a lot of people understand that, especially when the caregiver becomes the center of everyone's safety and everyone's ability to continue and move through life and have their own version of independence. But it also put in the back of my head, when does that protection start to become control? When you're shielding the people you're protecting and caring for, stopping them from being able to make decisions and make choices because of your care, that became really complicated.

Keith Casebonne (00:50:40):

For sure. Another thing I think they did really well was the book does show caregiver burnout. Nicholas does get burnt out as a caregiver at a point. But he's not a villain, he's

not looking to hurt anybody. I think it handled it really well because it is a real thing, and it showed it, I think, in a really well-balanced way. At times, sometimes Nicholas just tries to carry on too much for himself, he tries to take on too much, and that can cause problems. But I think they show it in a way that's, like I said, really balanced and gets past it. It doesn't become... again, he's not a bad guy because of it.

Jodi Beckstine (00:51:28):

And I think that's where a good part of Vinnie happens, is he pushes back, and you can't protect us by leaving us out type of thing. And that's such a strong disability rights theme. It should help people have control over their own lives, not provide less to them. And care doesn't mean that someone else is making all the decisions. And I really like that.

Keith Casebonne (00:52:01):

Yeah, me too.

Jodi Beckstine (00:52:03):

We see that a lot.

Keith Casebonne (00:52:05):

Yep, yep, yep. No, I agree.

Jodi Beckstine (00:52:07):

So the family's home is one of the emotional centers of the book. It's loud, and messy, and loving, and full of routines, and chaos. What does that shared home matter so much in a disability rights conversation, do you think?

Keith Casebonne (00:52:24):

Yeah, that's a good question. I think the home, well, it represents safety, and routine, connection, things like that. I think there's a stability that's been built there. And I think if you were to lose it, there's that threat of the unknown. There's that fear of, well, what happens next? And besides losing that community, you might also lose the ability to live independently. And so I think there's a lot of levels to the fact that they have that home. And again, I think it's a good thing. I think the authors do a really great job of making that clear how invaluable that is, and how, sometimes, it's really difficult to protect that for people with disabilities, sadly.

Jodi Beckstine (00:53:17):

Yeah. It's a place where they can be themselves. They guide their own routines and their own independence. And there is always this looming fear of having the state come in and take over, which is a really big theme that's happening today. So it was such a poignant thread that went through the book.

Keith Casebonne (00:53:50):

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. No, I agree. And the loss of that safety, again, could mean institutionalization. Nobody wants to see that.

Jodi Beckstine (00:54:08):

Yeah. And both Vinnie and Nicholas know what that can mean in real terms. And so that's kind of always echoing in the background.

Keith Casebonne (00:54:19):

Yeah. It makes the fear more real because they've been there and they know better. Yeah. Well, so another major theme in the book is how often people underestimate the characters. Sometimes, it's just open cruelty, but a lot of times, it's a little quieter. Sometimes displayed as pity or just awkwardness, people speaking over them. Sometimes just assuming that they don't really understand. So what are some examples of everyday ableism that stood out to you?

Jodi Beckstine (00:54:48):

Well, right in the beginning, Vinnie talks about how people make him feel small. And it's such a plain way of describing what many people with disabilities experience. It's not always this overdramatic act of discrimination. Sometimes it's just looks, or being talked over, or someone speaking to your caregiver instead of you as you're standing there. There's a moment in a bank that I think is a strong example, that Vinnie's sitting there, he's part of the conversation, but the bank manager keeps talking to Nicholas. And the authors even talked about it I think a little bit when they were talking about their review and how Nicholas is even in that. There was ableism even in someone reviewing the book where Nicholas is brought forward and Vinnie is talked over, and his whole character arc is diminished by that. So when people talk about discrimination, they think usually these big acts of things, and a lot of times, it's the small things that just, over time, wear you down.

Keith Casebonne (00:56:12):

Yeah. Yeah. And the book also shows really well though that at the same time, the characters are very much aware of these assumptions. They're not oblivious to it, they're

not unaffected by it. In fact, it drives the story in a lot of ways. It enables them to accomplish things that they need to accomplish. So what's great is how they turn those things back against the other person in their favor, which I think is just brilliant. I love that approach. I love that portrayal of it. I thought that just made the whole book all the better for it.

Jodi Beckstine (00:56:47):

Yeah. Yeah. And even the small polite versions of ableism is harmful too. They had those moments in there where pity is still harmful. Being treated like a child when you're an adult is still harmful. And the people that are doing those things aren't necessarily trying to be mean, or cruel, or discriminatory, or ableist, but they are. And they had a lot of that just throughout, which I appreciated.

Keith Casebonne (00:57:21):

I did too. Yeah.

Jodi Beckstine (00:57:25):

So Vinnie has a job. But the book makes a clear distinction between being allowed to work and being trusted to use your real skills. His cooking is not just a hobby, it's part of his identity, it's part of his memory and his confidence. How does the book show the harm of low expectations, especially when people with disabilities are only seen for the tasks others assume that they can handle?

Keith Casebonne (00:57:48):

Yeah. So Vinnie is portrayed as someone that is more capable than many people may think he would be. And as I mentioned earlier, he likes to cook, but it's not just words where he likes to cook, and it could be anything. He wants to be a chef. He wants to cook, he wants to be creative. He has a recipe book of his mother's recipes that he loves to make, and he does it with care. And I think that's something that, for some reason, people often misjudge people with disabilities about, that they can be that nuanced, and that caring, and that purposeful, I suppose, to follow a recipe with a personal touch. I can follow a recipe and make something, I don't know that I can necessarily make it feel like it was made with love and care. And Vinnie can. And I think that's really important. It connects him to his mother. So there is love there. Cooking is love. It connects him to his mom and his family and it gives him a real sense of purpose.

Jodi Beckstine (00:59:03):

Yeah. And the scene we're kind of alluding to without giving spoilers, people make assumptions immediately and the bar is always set so low. Most of the time, when you have a job, you're challenged to rise up and meet this new level and to keep growing. And for Vinnie, the bar is set low, "And that's all we expect from you, and that's great, good job." But there's no challenging, there's no rising above, there's no growth potential. And I think a lot of people with disabilities see that. They're given this opportunity, and I use that term loosely, and be thankful and, "Just do this. And thank you for what you're doing." But there'll be no challenges, there'll be no growth potential. It is what it is.

Keith Casebonne (01:00:04):

Right. Right. And a job... and maybe even job is the wrong word, a career. The idea of work is not just about income. I suppose for some people, maybe that is the main thing. But for most people, I feel it's a bigger thing than that. You take pride in your work and your job, and it's part of our identity, maybe too much of our identity in Western standards, sometimes people say, but it is an identifying thing. And to just go to the job and do the most menial tasks and not be allowed to grow or advance or show that you have skills, that's the opposite. And unfortunately, that's what a lot of people, including Vinnie, at first, experience. It's almost like reminds me of sheltered workshops. Okay, yeah, it's a job, you get to go do something every day, but oh my God, it's the most demeaning, repetitive, ridiculous tasks, and nobody enjoy... And it almost feels like what his job is like in the beginning, very just basic, unexciting stuff.

Jodi Beckstine (01:01:19):

Yeah. Not to bring up another episode, but it reminds me of Patrice: The Movie. We saw how she built this whole model of that theme park that she liked, and has built this whole thing and lights and all this stuff, but yet the job that she had at one point was just gluing the tips on American flags as if that's all... But she was so artistic, and she's so personable, and being a crossing guard is right on the money for her with her love of children and her ability to talk to people and stuff. So it drew those ties to me. The bar is just so low, and without asking people what they love to do, and what their skills are, and helping them grow.

Keith Casebonne (01:02:03):

Yep. Yeah, absolutely. I agree. I thought the same thing. Yeah. So without getting into spoilers, the book shows us that control over people with disabilities does not always look obvious. So sometimes, they can come through guardianship or conservatorship, benefits rules, limit savings and relationships. Also, Patrice's connection there. Service decisions made without the person at the center, pressure to accept institutional care. It's also

representative of payee arrangements and accessible legal processes. There's so many aspects of this. So what does the story reveal about how easily people with disabilities can be pushed out of decisions about their own lives, especially when other people claim they're acting in their very much, quote, "best interest"?

Jodi Beckstine (01:02:54):

Yeah. Yeah. I think the book is really clear on how control doesn't always look like someone being cruel. And we know in disability rights work that words like safety, and capacity, and best interests can be used in helpful ways, but they also can be used to take power away from people with disabilities. So I think the book shows how easily disabled people can be moved out of the center of decisions about their own lives when other people have the idea that they know what's best for them and have that level of control. What risks can they take? Is that their best interest? And that connects to real life issues, like guardianships, and conservatorships, and things like that. So what I appreciated is they brought this up, they worked through it in scenes, and the book really ties autonomy to dignity. And I think that means a lot. That is such a big theme through the book.

Keith Casebonne (01:04:12):

Yeah, I agree. I think you've kind of put it as well as you can. The story connects that, like you said, dignity and autonomy and all those things. Being safe does not mean being silenced. So I think a big takeaway is that people with disabilities, they deserve support and information, trusted advocacy, and having real decision-making power.

Jodi Beckstine (01:04:39):

Absolutely. Absolutely. It's a big topic, especially within the disabled community. It's very sensitive, and I'm so glad that they touched on it, and talked about it, and put it out there. Because I think people without disabilities can get a clearer picture on what that is like and what that feels like. So that was great.

Keith Casebonne (01:05:03):

I agree. Yeah. Yep.

Jodi Beckstine (01:05:05):

So the book is funny, but it also deals with serious stuff, and that balance can be hard to pull off. How did the humor affect the way you experienced the disability representation?

Keith Casebonne (01:05:19):

Yeah, you're right. There is that dichotomy there. So humor can make characters feel more human because typical people are allowed to be funny, sarcastic, and awkward, and petty, and joyful, and complicated, and all those good things. And the humor works best when it comes from a person's personality and also their relationships, timing, a little bit of the family's shared history helps with that. So I think the hard question though is whether the audience is laughing with the characters or at the assumptions other people make about them. And so we want to laugh with, not laugh at.

(01:06:04):

And I think sometimes it's a fine line, sometimes it's subtle. I think the book does a really great job of using humor in a very positive way. And it shows everyone's, I don't want to say necessarily shortcomings, but everyone has good, everyone has bad, it doesn't matter whether you're disabled or not. And the jokes are there for everybody. And I remember laughing and smiling a lot reading the book. I thought it was really, really amusing at times. So that humor keeps you very much engaged in the story, what can sometimes be a difficult story at times. And so I think it does a really good job with that.

Jodi Beckstine (01:06:50):

Absolutely. I think a strong point for people to take away is that the book shifted with humor, shifted from pity to perspective. We talk about what... The main book is about heist. So it has this morally gray area in it. Is it okay to do something wrong for the right reasons? I don't know. I thought it was really good. I thought they balanced it really well, seriousness, deep disability themes with this humor and this kind of chaos and unusual theme of the story. I really enjoyed it. And like you, I found myself chuckling to myself in spots and ending a chapter with a smile on my face. I really enjoyed the experience of reading the book.

Keith Casebonne (01:08:01):

Yeah, I did too. I will though add, as the antithesis to that, the book does also use some strong ableist language. And there are some painful moments where that really shows harm to some of those characters with disabilities. And it's difficult to read, but sadly, it's also realistic. And I like that the authors didn't shy away from that. They showed the kind of harm that people can sometimes inflict on people with disabilities, and they didn't shy from that. I thought that was a bold move by the authors. And honestly, I think it was commendable that it is that blunt, yet at the same time, overcome.

Jodi Beckstine (01:08:45):

Yes. Yes. I appreciate that as well.

Keith Casebonne (01:08:51):

Well, *Merry Band of Misfits* gives us a lot to discuss because it does not just treat disability as one simple idea. It looks at support, independence, work, family, legal control, and the daily experience of being underestimated. And for a debut novel, Sebastian Grey gives readers something memorable, a story that is funny, fast moving, full of heart, while still asking serious questions about autonomy, dignity, and who gets to decide what a good life looks like.

Jodi Beckstine (01:09:18):

Yes. What I appreciate most is that the characters with disabilities are not written as symbols or lessons, they are people with relationships, skills, flaws, humor, fear, anger, and agency. And what makes a book stand out is it's not just a heist story with disability in the background, it's a story about people who have been overlooked, learning how powerful they can be when they trust themselves and each other.

Keith Casebonne (01:09:41):

Yeah, for sure. I think a line that really captures the book for me is, "*Merry Band of Misfits* is a laugh-out-loud heist with a disability rights heartbeat." It is entertaining, but it also leaves readers thinking about the systems, assumptions, and low expectations that people with disabilities are still forced to navigate.

Jodi Beckstine (01:09:58):

I would say this, Sebastian Grey and *Merry Band of Misfits* reminds us that being underestimated is not the same as being powerless. Being seen is only the beginning. The deeper question is whether people with disabilities are being heard, trusted, respected, and allowed to shape the lives they want to live. A huge thank you again to Sebastian Grey for joining us and for talking with us about *Merry Band of Misfits*, disability representation, storytelling, and what it means for disabled characters to be written as the heroes of their own lives.

Keith Casebonne (01:10:29):

Yeah, this conversation reminds us that representation is about more than whether disabled characters appear in a story. It's more about whether they are given agency, complexity, relationships, humor, risk, and the power to shape what happens next. You can learn more about Sebastian Grey and *Merry Band of Misfits* wherever books are sold.

Jodi Beckstine (01:10:48):

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