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Transcript

Rebekah Borucki: Hello, neighbor! Welcome to our third season of The Book Stoop...

And if you're new here, lemme help you get to where you're goin'.

So, you're gonna go past the corner bodega and down the block from the fresh cuts barbershop, and there you'll find a brick row house at the intersection of Literature Place and Social Justice Blvd. That's where you'll find the stoop.

Our host, Amanda Lytle, will be there to welcome you to the conversation. The Book Stoop is the place for the hottest takes on book culture, nerd culture, current events, with best-selling authors, change-makers, and risk-takers—our people.

And I'm Rebekah Borucki, President of Row House Publishing.

Now, come on in and meet Amanda.

Amanda Lytle: Thanks Bex. Hey, friend. Let me be the second to welcome you to our spot, The Book Stoop. I feel incredibly honored to be the host of this podcast and I'm so grateful to have you here.

Today on The Book Stoop, I'm speaking with Jess Bird. Jess is a self-taught artist and illustrator, making her magic in her hometown of Rochester, New York. She started an Instagram in-shop Bless the Messy in 2014 in an effort to connect back to herself and others during the darkness of depression. Exposing herself as a messy in-process human figuring it out, she uses her illustrations to convey what she's learning, how she's feeling and how she moves through the world around her.

Her hope is that people feel seen, validated and less alone. She started Bless the Messy in the closet both literally and figuratively and has grown as an artist and human alongside so many of those who have supported her journey even at a distance. In the conversation today, we hear about lessons learned from life with chickens and how they have helped create community.

Jess shares a bit how social media has been used as a tool to share as she has been navigating life and finding safety in herself and being at home in her body without the filters or trying to shapeshift to gain love and acceptance from others.

Jess also shares a bit about how she has had to completely dismantle the life that she had been living in order to step into authenticity and truth. Before we jump in, I want to invite you to share The Book Stoop with your community.

If you're loving this episode, grab a screenshot and tag us on Instagram at @rowhousepub. Every share, five-star rating and written review helps us find more listeners and climb the charts. So we're super grateful for your help.

We start our chats on The Book Stoop with a rather fitting question, "So what are you reading these days?"

Jess Bird: OK, I definitely thought about lying just because it's like not like cool. My brain is like, "Oh, what should I say? I should say something." But truly it's called *The Way of the Hen: Zen and the Art of Raising Chickens*. I found it at the thrift store, and I bought it just because I raise backyard chickens and I love them so much and I bought it like just to put in my chicken stack of books.

Then I started reading it and it was like so peaceful and like grounding and just like basically about how in these like everyday tasks we can find joy and peace and like comfort in like seemingly things that are so small, like tending to chickens. But I feel that way when I take care of mine. So it's just that's seriously what I'm reading right now.

Amanda Lytle: I love that, and I love that you didn't lie about it because now that you've mentioned even chickens and I know that you are saying that you have a tiny flock, I'm so fascinated by that. My sister is kind of creating her own little homestead and she was talking about how therapeutic it is to just be with her chickens.

Jess Bird: Yes, it really is. I have said before. It's like this was really no bias, organic, example of taking care of something and taking care of you, like how amazing that can be. Like you tend to your chickens, and you love them because I really like love mine like I would love our dog.

But then they would take care of us by providing us with eggs, which feeds our bodies, and it feeds our soul and like all those things. Also like it has been a huge thing to build community like in my neighborhood because I live in a city and so every time someone has helped push my car from getting stuck in the snow or like I just like bring everyone eggs and it's like this super cute thing that I have really become – I don't know. It just is something that makes me so happy.

There was an older man down the street that came back with someone because I was like getting rid of some stuff that was here when we bought the house, and they were looking at it. He couldn't believe there were just chickens running around with my children and he loved it. I just like opened the coop and there were some eggs in there and I was like, "Do you want to take this home?"

He was like just so – thought it was so magical and he was like telling me exactly how he's going to prepare his eggs and like how he's going to eat them, and it was just like – it was really endearing.

Amanda Lytle: It's incredible how something so simple can bring such connection.

Jess Bird: Yes, because they bring me so much joy but then it like – I’m so all about community. So the way – anytime we can like bring people together and it like doesn’t cost anything or doesn’t like – like yeah, it costs me money to take care of them but it’s something I would do anyways because they bring me joy.

So the fact that I can then like provide and bring community together in like such a small way that isn’t like costing us anything or isn’t like – I don’t know. There’s no barrier there. I feel like a lot of times with community these days, there are access barriers.

So appreciate any time that you can just be neighborly or community-based without necessarily having to go through life filling out a worksheet or like having access to financial things that get you into *classes* [0:06:06] [*Phonetic*] or this or that.

Amanda Lytle: Right. OK. Well, you just like segued perfectly into one of the questions that I wanted to ask you about community. So you’ve created this incredible space online. I want you to tell me a little bit about what community means to you and how you’ve come back to the roots of that, establishing this online.

Jess Bird: I mean community is everything to me which seems like absurd. But when you grow up without – I don’t have any relationship with either of my parents. I grew up in a situation very low income, lots of drug abuse and alcohol abuse and just verbal abuse. So as I built community when I was a kid, they really became my family in a lot of ways.

So that’s just something I’ve always wanted to foster and feeling a lot left out in life at times because of socioeconomic status and like feeling embarrassed about my – I couldn’t have friends over because it was like not [0:07:07] [*Indiscernible*]. It was a scary place to be. I lived in like a lot of housing situations where a lot of bad things were going down. So anyways, all that to say building community has always been really important to me and like authentic community.

So it is like family but it’s also like this openness in online. I think it started just from my own messy life and being honest about that. My online space literally started because I was so depressed. I was just like painting words I needed to hear, like hanging them around our house, and just being honest about where my mental health was at, at the time.

I just don’t think that was really out there as openly as I was putting it and so people came in. But I want to like – as much as I put out there, I want it to be like a give-and-take, I guess. I want to like hear from people. I want to support people. I want people to just feel like they’re not alone and there’s a lot of darkness and I just want people to feel not alone in that.

Amanda Lytle: It’s such a gift that you’re providing because I say this often is that one, if you don’t see it, how do you know that you can be it? But then also two is the authenticity in sharing one’s story. I think whether it directly or indirectly gives someone else the permission to do the same. So by standing in integrity and by stepping into courage, you are opening that window or that door for someone else. So it’s monumental what you’re doing in my opinion.

Jess Bird: Thanks. I don't like really look at it that way. But I definitely see the good things that have come with being open and it's really a gift and I always say that I hold it really like loosely because I think when anyone's platform grows or something, if you hold it too tight, it just becomes something you don't want.

So I have really healthy boundaries with things like Instagram because I don't want to hold it too tight. I don't want to like put so much stock in it that that's where I find my self-worth or to me it's like a tool to make community and a tool to connect. But other than that, I have real in-person community. I don't want to say Instagram is not real community because I definitely have community on there that's real.

But I mean I seek out my in-person community to like – I don't even know. Like just – like I don't put all my self-worth. I guess that's the big thing. I don't get all my validation and self-worth and all of that from online or followers or likes. It's just – like I said, it's just a tool for me.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah. But I think that even back to saying that it's monumental work is because I think that this is where there is that balance between navigating identity both in person and online. But as your following has grown into hundreds of thousands, I think that that's where – if you aren't holding on to it too tightly and are holding it loosely, that by modeling that, it's also kind of showing your boundaries, which again you've segued so beautifully into something else I wanted to ask you about identity because you're now navigating identity online as your platform grows. Like you've said, by not holding on to it too tightly.

But I'm curious about your own navigation journey when it comes to identity, when you grew up in a place that wasn't necessarily safe, and you are now prioritizing the authenticity that comes both with community and oneself and self-expression. So I'm curious about your own journey through becoming exactly who's showing up on this call right now.

Jess Bird: It's a kind of journey to say the least. I always say that my primary goal growing up the way I did was to seek safety. So I don't think I recognized that at the time. But I was always going to make the most safe choice.

So that is why I came out later in life and why – you know, this is the person but I'm in my mid-30s because safety was my goal to not have the chaos, to have some stability and once I did acquire that, I married a very good man. I married a very kind person, and he was safe, but that safety also gave me the space to become myself and when that happened, it was an unraveling of just like realizing we don't fit together. But I'm always so thankful for his kindness and love because that's really like what made me feel safe enough to figure some stuff out until I get the help I needed to move through that stuff at therapy and all of that.

It was a huge mess. It was not easy at all, but I think that what really has continued it is that I know now that I'm safe in myself. Where I didn't know that I think I just was always seeking external safety and now that I feel safe and at home in myself and my body and who I am, that I

can talk about that online because I'm not like trying to be anyone else. I'm not trying to put my words through like the filters of what everyone else will think before I say them.

I'm just coming from where I am and who I am in my thoughts and without wondering – my ex-husband's parents will be upset that I posted it, or will this person be upset or like this – I know now that like I just have to know who I am and I'm wrong sometimes and I can be corrected and like all of those things and I'm open for all discussions about it. But I know that I'm not filtering myself to make other people happy anymore, which was like so hard because when you grow up without love from maternal and paternal people and you don't have it, like I don't really have an extended family very much.

So you are seeking love in just not great places. So I feel like that's what happened is I was willing to put the filters on myself so that I would be loved and that I would be safe but that's only because I didn't really love myself and I didn't feel safe in myself.

Amanda Lytle: And thank you so much for sharing that. I think that this all truly deeply contributes to how you're showing up and I think that that is so relatable, hence back to why I think it's so important that you're sharing this because I think the seeking of one's safety and self-worth in other people, other places, other experiences but also in what we perceive to be safe is so common.

Jess Bird: Oh, definitely. I think that people, I think that we are just taught to do certain things and live certain ways and sometimes it's just even like the generational pain of families. Like I was taught because of my own pain with my family and like that generational pain goes back to abuse and alcoholism and drugs. Like it goes back and back, and I think that I was basically taught one, you marry a man; two, you – if he does not – is faithful and also doesn't drink, then like you stay no matter what.

So that was a big thing that once I started being honest with myself and safe in myself and actually started to like myself a little, which is still hard to say out loud – again, I had to admit that that wasn't right for me and that wasn't my truth. But it was really hard because there was no logical reason to leave this safe thing. Logical to the norm, you know. Our culture here and that's just the way it is. You just do these things to be successful or safe or whatever you see. You know, your parents instill in you, and I only had a nana. She was my grandma, and she was kind of who like took me in and like when I was 16, because homeless and she took me in and that was it.

Like she just wanted better for me. So because she was the only one I was getting that like love from and care, like I just wanted to make her happy and I think that's why I was always pursuing what she thought was best. It wasn't like I was unhappy. You know, I always say it's like when you choose to do what's expected of you or whatever, you can still be pretty happy. Like I always call it mostly happy. Like I was mostly happy, but I still had such a pain inside of me because I wasn't authentically living as who I'm supposed to be.

So I would always ask myself. Can I just be mostly happy for the rest of my life and like that be enough or do I want to do this hard part which is dismantling all this social norm to live my most authentic life? That's what I wanted to do. I hated every minute of it but on the other side like I would do it again and I remember my nana telling me that because I crave stability so much, like when I was kid, I cried when she got a new toaster because her health was my only stable place, and something changed. So she would say the fact that you are going through all this and losing so many people and like having to deal with so much change just to be – like I know that this is who you are because if you are crying over a toaster, then clearly this is who you're meant to be.

Amanda Lytle: Right. And you also mentioned just the social norms that we're very aware are by design and are intended to keep people small. So that even comes back to the breaking generational agreements and of course that that would feel heavy at times but to step into the unknown and put yourself first and decide that mostly happy and mostly good isn't good enough.

Like if we could maybe come back to that, the idea that there have been so many threads I feel like that have been part of you having to play small in order to fit someone else's comfort zone. Can you tell me a bit about that?

Jess Bird: Yeah. So part of it is being safe. Part of it is growing up with a mother that definitely suffers from narcissism. Like there was not one room to take up any space with her and two, I just knew that if I did, the consequences could be very scary at times.

So – and also with that, when you grow up with somebody who makes your whole life about them, you think you have to go so far the other way. So instead of ever wanting any – like to be in any kind of spotlight or anything like that, I wanted to be so humble and basically just like to a point where I was like – just ended up like codependent, like letting people walk all over me, no boundary situation because I was like, no, like someone else take the credit or do that thing or get to be the loudest one in the room because that can't be me because if I draw that to myself, I'm being like this person that caused me a lot of pain.

So I think that I just learned to adapt to situations and be what I needed to be again to gain love, acceptance, whatever that might look like or to get into somebody's ideal box of how I should operate in the world because anything I wanted to be, there was either consequences or it wasn't – it wasn't palatable. It wasn't what people wanted from me and so I just – keeping quiet, again, it just kept me safe and let me be very likable.

I think that people – I had a lot of friends growing up, but I don't think I had a lot of people that knew me deeply and would love me anyways. Like my best friend from third grade is still my best friend. We have gone through a lot of going in and out but like she's someone that like saw me go through all these hard things at my house and she still loves me, and she has never *[0:20:13] [Indiscernible]* me and she's like – you go through growing up things but that makes so much sense to me because I was too young even sometimes to like put on all the layers for her. So she just saw it anyways whereas like as I grew up, I learned how do you put on the layers to fit for people what they wanted me to be.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, thank you for sharing that. I think now understanding a little bit more to the back story of why an outlet would be so important. I would love for you to highlight and tell us all about Luna and your art.

Jess Bird: So Luna is – I could cry just talking about it just because I love it. It is my studio space that I opened only two years ago. It kind of came from once – making my art sort of became my job. I realized that I didn't love being alone. It's also an ADHD thing. Like I don't work great by myself. Like I could be sitting with someone and not talking but just like two energies help me like get stuff done.

So I got a first studio that was in – it was a tiny, tiny little room. It was in a yoga studio with someone who was one of my greatest friends now and she offered me this small room and it was outside of my house and I will just never forget like one of the first times after I moved in, and she was like lonely because she was running a business by herself and one of the first times after I had moved in and she sneezed and I said, "Bless you," from my studio and she just was, "Oh god, I love that someone is here."

So that community really started there and then I wanted to expand it. Her yoga studio didn't make it through the pandemic and then our local LGBTQ center did not make it through the pandemic for that and other reasons. I swear my wife who was just then my partner, she was going to like buy a building. Like I was scared she was just going to go out and like do something crazy because she was like, "There's nowhere for these people to gather."

So I got a call about a studio that had opened. It was way more space than I wanted. It was 2000 square feet, and I was like, "What am I going to do with this?" I just started opening the doors and letting people in and it grew. Like the community grew and there are other artists there. I make no money off of it. That's basically just people helping me pay for the space but I still feel – like I pay more than anyone because it's my space and I just want people to have access to places that inspire them where they feel safe, where they feel accepted and loved like just as they are and it has been – I mean my closest friends are the people that exist at Luna or in Luna for whatever reason, whether it be people that actually rent space from me or just people that come and spend time and co-work or it's just like a little family.

We just talk about really real things and it's a very diverse group of people and I'm so thankful that I have so many people to learn from, to ask questions to safely. Like that was like a really big thing and why I love Luna. You know, there are so many questions people do have while they're like unlearning and relearning things.

But it's always scary where to ask those things that's safe. One, you don't want to put more work on either black, queer, trans, indigenous, anyone from a marginalized community. You don't want to put more work on them than they are wanting to share. So you have to find your own answers and also if you want to ask someone questions, there has to be someone that wants to receive questions.

So that's something that has been very cool to watch build in Luna because there are multiple black women. There are black nonbinary people. There's – I'm a queer white woman. Like just there's so many like intersections that like we can have these conversations and it's hard sometimes. Sometimes the conversations get yucky in the sense that people are uncomfortable, and we have to say things to each other that are hard but like there's so much growth that comes on the other side, that that's how you know you're in a safe community.

We have programs for youth just to come and have access to art right now. I have Thursdays. I just have a bunch of kids that come in that don't know what to do with their summer vacation and they just sit there and like draw all day and hang out with me. It's just like I just wanted – I call it like my communal living room because that's all I ever wanted was a place to feel safe and I did feel that at a lot of my friends' houses, and I just want that for like an entire community. Like come in. Have coffee. Like I don't want people to always have to like pay to have community and access and tools and I just want to exist outside of that.

Amanda Lytle: It sounds so beautiful.

Jess Bird: Thanks. Just lots of plans, lots of [0:25:44] [*Indiscernible*] and happiness. There's randomly painting on walls in the middle of the day because I'm having some paper focus, but I don't know. Like it's just – it's very – it's just really a safe, happy place and when we do have events, like you see how like vast our community is because everyone brings in different people and just watching them all coexist in this space and like hang out and like laugh. It just fills me with so much joy and that's what I feel like my greatest work is. Like making spaces for people to like safely exist.

Amanda Lytle: Yeah, that's beautiful. Oh, Jess, this is great. I appreciate you sharing and the depth of your answers so, so much. Thank you.

Jess Bird: Sorry if there are tangents.

Amanda Lytle: I'm always here for the tangents.

Jess Bird: OK.

Amanda Lytle: My last question for you is about a shoutout. So if you had a shoutout for an account, a person, an organization, disruptor, activist or change agent, who would it be?

Jess Bird: OK. I want to shout out Blk Book Swap. It's B-L-K Book Swap. It's my friend Trae. She lives in Brooklyn. She's a queer, black woman. She's brilliant and she actually became my friend. She's an online friend and she became my friend from calling me out actually years ago. But she did it in such a way that was so – it sparked this whole conversation, and I learned a lot and like I really valued her insight to something I had said.

From there, we kind of just started like a supportive friendship and I just am so thankful for everything she puts out there. Just like so much like queer joy she puts into the world and then

she also runs a book swap where she has these popups in Brooklyn where you can like swap books, get used books and like have – people having more access to things. Like nice books, like it seems so silly. But it's something that a lot of people don't get access to like – and I love watching her grow with it and serve her community in such a special way and she leads like a book club on there usually and does like book racks and I just – it's very cool and she's amazing. So ...

Amanda Lytle: Well, thank you for that. I will definitely make sure to have that linked in the notes.

Jess Bird: Perfect.

Amanda Lytle: Jess, thank you. Thank you for sharing and for being a guest on The Book Stoop. This has been great.

Jess Bird: Thank you so much and I'm so nervous but I hope that you can compile it to be a cohesive thought.

Amanda Lytle: It's beautiful.

Jess Bird: OK. Thanks so much.

Amanda Lytle: Thank you so much for being with us. Please be sure to check out rowhousepublishing.com/podcast for full episode transcriptions and guest image descriptions and the show notes for all the links. Talk soon.

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Transcript by Prexie Magallanes as [Trans-Expert](#) at Fiverr.com