

00:00:00	Music	Music	“Switchblade Comb” by Mobius VanChocStraw. A jaunty, jazzy tune reminiscent of the opening theme of a movie that plays for several moments, then slowly fades out under dialogue.
00:00:07	April Wolfe	Host	Welcome to <i>Switchblade Sisters</i> , where women get together to slice and dice our favorite action and genre films. I’m April Wolfe. Every week, I invite a new female filmmaker on: a writer, director, actor, or producer. And we talk, in depth, about one of their fave genre films. Perhaps one that influenced their own work, in some small way.
00:00:26	Jennifer Reeder	Guest	And today, I’m very excited to have writer, director Jennifer Reeder here with me. Hi, Jennifer!
00:00:27	April	Host	Hi!
			For those of you who aren’t as familiar with Jennifer’s work, please let me give you an introduction. Jennifer is an Ohio-born and Chicago-based filmmaker, artist, and professor who earned her MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Early in her career, she drew up on her roots, broke—and broke into the art scene with performance and video work under the moniker White Trash Girl: an alter ego she used to explore class identity, which was also ultimately included the book <i>White Trash: Race and Class in America</i> .
			Throughout her career, she straddled the line of hard art and indie filmmaking, constructing personal fiction films about relationships, trauma, and coping—borrowing from a range of forms, including after-school specials, amateur music videos, and magical realism. These films include her numerous shorts that have played and taken prizes at Sundance, Berlin, Rotterdam, South by Southwest, the Vince Biennale, the Whitney Biennial, and a bunch of other ones.
			She directed her first feature, <i>Accidents at Home and How They Can Happen</i> , in 2008. And then, in 2017, released her follow-up feature, <i>Signature Move</i> —about a Muslim lesbian who finds her identity by falling in love with a Mexican woman and luchador wrestling. This year marks the release of her third feature, <i>Knives and Skin</i> , a hyperreal and often hilarious narrative deconstructing the cliché of the murdered girl in a small town.
			Jennifer has been financially supported by the Rooftop Adrienne Shelly foundation, the Hamburg film fund, and with a Creative Capital grant in moving image. She is a USA Artist nominee for 2008, 2015, 2016, and 2017. And a Herb Alpert film award nominee. She’s currently Associate Professor of Moving Image at the University of Illinois, Chicago. Which, uh, I—[<i>dropping to a whisper</i>] I once got kicked out of, in Illinois, Chicago.
00:02:09	Crosstalk	Crosstalk	[<i>Chuckles bashfully.</i>] Jennifer: Oh.
			April: I didn’t go to school there, [<i>laughs</i>] I was just partying there, and they told me not to come back.
			Jennifer: Greeeat. Great.

00:02:15	April	Host	So, I assume it's still got rigorous standards, there.
00:02:19	Jennifer	Guest	I mean, not on my watch.
00:02:21	April	Host	Oh. <i>[Breaks into wheezing laughter.]</i>
00:02:22	Jennifer	Guest	You know? That might have been west campus.
00:02:25	April	Host	<i>[Laughs.]</i> Uh, your film, <i>Knives and Skin</i> , I saw at Fantastic Fest and just absolutely adored it. Can you tell people when that's coming out? Is it December 6 th ?
00:02:33	Jennifer	Guest	December 6 th , through IFC Midnight and theaters and VOD.
00:02:36	April	Host	Okay. Alright. So, we'll get back to that. But today, Jennifer—the movie that you chose to talk about, today, is <i>Safe</i> by Todd Haynes. Can you give us a little explanation on why this is one of your favorite genre films?
00:02:48	Jennifer	Guest	<i>[April makes several sounds of agreement as Jennifer talks.]</i> For sure. So, I remember seeing it in a theater, when it came out at the Music Box—which is a beautiful, vintage theater in Chicago. And I think, from the very first frame of the film through the very end of it, I just watched it with my mouth hanging open. Based on, not just the story, but the pacing, the art direction... I mean, Carol White is a character—an unforgettable character who has actually made her way into every single one of my own female characters. I think I had seen Todd's Karen Carpenter story, <i>Superstar</i> ? Much previous to that. And so, was kind of, you know, curious about—I was curious about <i>Safe</i> . And it's like, I just became obsessed with it and it's probably my most favorite film. Or in the top three. So, I'm really glad that we get to talk about it.
00:03:38	April	Host	Yeah. I can—I can see some parallels. More than some. I can see a lot of parallels in what you are doing, specifically in <i>Knife and Skin</i> , and then also in <i>Safe</i> . So, um. For those of you who haven't seen <i>Safe</i> , today's episode will give you some spoilers, but that shouldn't stop you from listening before you watch. As always, my moto is that it's not <u>what</u> happens, but <u>how</u> it happens that makes a movie worth watching. Still, if you would like to pause and watch <i>Safe</i> first, this is your chance.
00:04:00	Music	Music	"Safe" by Ed Tomney starts a slow, low fade-in behind the dialogue. An eerie, ominous piece of organ music.
00:04:01	Jennifer	Guest	This is one of those movies I don't think you can spoil, either. So.
00:04:04	April	Host	Right. <i>[Laughs.]</i> Now, let me introduce <i>Safe</i> with a quick synopsis. Written and directed by Todd Haynes for release in 1995, <i>Safe</i> stars Julianne Moore as Carol White: a typical, affluent, suburban woman in the San Fernando Valley, circa 1987. Carol leads a full but sterile life. We see her gardening, going to aerobics classes, and running errands. Doing a bunch of stuff with friends. Sometimes, we see her husband—who is neither affectionate, nor mean, but just simply <u>there</u> . A husband.
00:04:31	Clip	Clip	Greg White: Honey, can you call the landscapers again about the sod? I gotta get moving on that, you know? Or we're gonna miss— Carol White: I'll try them again.
00:04:37	April	Host	Greg: Thanks, hon. Everything in Carol's life, including Carol, seems distant. She also has a stepson. Their relationship is also nothing to write home

about. But as Carol continues going through the motions of her lovely, sterile life, she begins to feel ill. Her symptoms are unpredictable, erratic, and strange. Suddenly, she feels totally fatigued, but can't explain it. Then, when a truck passes her, she begins coughing uncontrollably on its exhaust while everyone else seems fine.

And that kind of begins the spark of a downfall of Carol. Because a perm at the hair salon gives her a bloody nose. A baby shower triggers an asthma attack. Vomiting, shaking, all of it. And she never knows when it's coming. Like some invisible force is surrounding her with potential danger at every turn.

Doctors can only find a milk allergy.

00:05:21 Clip Clip

Dr. Hubbard: I really don't see anything wrong with you, Carol. I mean, outside of a slight rash and the congestion.

00:05:27 April Host

Carol believes she suffers from something called MCS—multiple chemical sensitivity—a little known disease that some people believe is imagined, where low-doses of everyday chemicals make the sufferer chronically ill.

00:05:39 Clip Clip

Music: Surreal, chiming music plays in the background of the video.

Video Narrator: Your family and friends tell you that you're overreacting. That's it's all in your head. But your symptoms worsen. Fatigue and depression turn to migraines, blackouts, even seizures. Now, if this sounds familiar, you're not alone. What you most likely are, is one of a vastly growing number of people who suffer from environmental illness.

00:06:08 April Host

Psychotherapy doesn't help, so she turns to New Age practitioners, attending a retreat at a desert ranch called Wrenwood. There, she meets others like herself and they listen to a leader who instills in them that the power to be healed lies within themselves.

00:06:22 Clip Clip

Peter Dunning: Because when you look out on the world from a place of love... and a place of forgiveness... what you are seeing, outside... is a reflection of what you feel, within.

00:06:40 April Host

This is a kind of muddled message that Carol gets. People aren't quite sure if they're getting what they need and the story ends in a kind of circular pattern where Carol's breathing from a machine and looking into the darkness, wondering what's next.

00:06:55 Jennifer Guest

[April makes several sounds of agreement as Jennifer talks.]

Right. I mean, it's one of the first films that I—that I saw that left me gutted, at the end. I mean, I think that Todd Haynes has a tendency to do that. I would consider him a feminist filmmaker, but he oftentimes leaves his females leads in a... in a lower place than when they started. And the ending of *Safe*—and I just—I just re-watched it in anticipation of this conversation—

—is gutting. I have never seen a film end like that. And, you know, I don't necessarily—well, that might be—get spoiled, although it's also not—it's a gutting ending, but also, like, not remarkable. I mean, it's—every single moment in this—in this film, from the delivery of the wrong color couch, at the beginning, to—you know—when, like, the low-level starting to unravel. You know, I just think that I had never seen a film that dealt with—I mean, you mentioned *White Trash Girl*.

I—So, I had been sort of thinking about whiteness, for a while, at that period of time and what white—and what are representations of whiteness, what does whiteness look like—how to unpack whiteness outside of something like white power, you know? Which is not something I was interested in. And this was a film that really felt like it was about a white woman, you know? And what that meant and how deep that meant.

00:08:19 April Host *[Jennifer makes several sounds of agreement as April talks.]*
Well, it's an interesting thing. The, okay, so there's a couple of things that you brought up that I definitely have some notes on, that I want to go to. First, I'm gonna go back to the kind of, um, torturing of the female characters that you said. You know? Like, this kind of—like—letting them suffer and they don't necessarily get the reprieve. Because Todd Haynes talks a lot about Hitchcock, when he talks about *Safe*.

He said, quote, "Most overtly, I was thinking about the TV disease films, when I made this. But the film language of horror films was also inspirational. I love that moment in Hitchcock when you know something is about to happen and suspense is created by prolonging the ordinary, mundane events that proceed this event. He got off on it. He got off on torturing his heroines. He makes us get off on it, too. It's the most interesting thing that he did. He made the viewer get off on it and paralleled to that what is innately pleasurable in watching movies. But Hitchcock takes a lot more pleasure in torturing his heroine than I do, in *Safe*, whatever that means."

So, he's kind of disavowing himself, in that sense. Where, like—he's not quite letting her get, you know, attacked by birds. But there—I mean, I can see, when he talks about Hitchcock and horror, I can absolutely see—in the composition of his shots and the way that he approaches the camera finding Carol, in the scene—there is so much here that he's building with the same kind of atmosphere of just, like, letting his leading lady, kind of, squirm. And letting, you know, the environment just, kind of, do its terrible bidding, you know?

00:09:48 Jennifer Guest Oh, 100%. And I just re-watched... *Marnie*, which is maybe one of my favorite Hitchcocks. And the way that he uses—the same as Todd Haynes—these slooow camera movements. These slooow zooms. And where in *Marnie*, there's lots of use of color to trigger a kind of a psychosis?

[April agrees.]

00:10:28 April Host It's the same in *Safe*, but in a much more nuanced way. It's like the color—that's like that unrelenting pastels in *Safe* become that, kind of, like a psychological tic.
Yeah. I mean, in your film, you have these kind of unrelenting—you know—like, magentas. And these, kind of—these hotter colors that are, you know, like you're clearly using these gels and, kind of, putting these lights and these colors to the extreme of realism. And like, there's still things that are real happening, but there's a heightened realism happening.

00:10:49 Jennifer Guest *[April agrees several times as Jennifer talks.]*
 Right. And I think that—I mean, that was also—that was also super intentional. And I think, you know, comes directly from my history as, you know, an art school kid, not a film school kid.

And my history, even, as a ballet dancer, you know? There's something that's, you know—the dramatic lighting of a stage, a theatrical stage—has always, you know, drawn me in and even literally in my own house, I feel like I have dramatic, cinema lighting in my—*[chuckles]* in my own house. The minute someone comes in and sort of turns on the overhead light, it's as though—you know—I mean, I have an allergic reaction to it.

So—but in—but in—but in *Knives and Skin*, it felt like I wanted the lighting to indicate that this world that you're in is hovering just above reality. But it also felt important that those colors, you know—no gender owns pink and purple. I sort of—but I wanted it to feel like femme. There's a—there's like this vibrating femme energy, let's say. And the—there's something significant about the color pink, as a—as an emblem, let's say. So, it's like that, you know, there's a—like, *Knives and Skin* is, like, yeah. Like vibrating with, like, super pink.

00:12:02 April Host Well, I think that kind of brings me to this next thing that I wanted to talk about. Which is the environment that we're—that we're creating. Todd Haynes said, "I'm definitely drawn to minimalism, aesthetically. I think it's beautiful, and so the film is beautiful too, to me. Although, what's beautiful about *Safe* is also hard and rigid and cold and controlled and so it's scary. I definitely felt the need to depict Carol constantly in relation to her environment, and as part of its architecture. We were trying to define her and feel her and find her, as a character, but we always did it in relation to her space. You don't really have full access to the character—to her psychology, history, things that were usually pretty quickly given to the—access to, in the movie. But you have access to her environment."

00:12:44 Jennifer Guest *[April agrees intermittently as Jennifer speaks.]*
 Exactly. And I think that that's something that I've—that I have—that I also noticed, from the beginning. And if you—the way that he composes—that Todd Haynes composes the frames.

In *Safe*, in particular—you know, she's often sort of right in the middle and we're zooming in, and she is—you know—she has a—she has a, sort of, a place in the structure of that frame, whether it's a mirror that's over here. There's a painting, there's the horizontal back of the couch. It's all so—it's really rigid and particular. And so, when that pattern starts to break down—like, we all feel, you know—we all feel the unease of that. Even something like the milk that she drinks, at the beginning. Sort of unrelentingly. Like, that's really all we know about her, right? Like, we really don't know anything about her.

Even at the end, she's like a really unknowable character, you know? And so, all we know about her—at the beginning, I mean we're introduced basically to her, to her husband and her stepson—

and we know she likes milk, but she's a very... she's a really untethered character, you know? In the sense that—for instance—she meets with one of her friends that suggests that she start the fruit diet. So, that's what she does. Then someone else suggests this, so that's what she does. And, you know, even though Haynes leaves her in this very still unknowable place, at the—at the end of the film, there's something that's still... sympathetic.

And I think that, with all of the—like—the art direction, the dialogue, everything that goes together to make this film—and for sure in Julianne Moore's performance—I think he's asking you for empathy. You know? To be empathetic. Super empathetic. So, at the end—I mean, I've—I love this film, but every time I watch it, I feel a little queasy [*laughing through her words*] at the—at the end.
April: No! Absolutely!

00:14:39 Crosstalk Crosstalk

Jennifer: You know, I feel [*laughs*] totally sick to my stomach! Right?

00:14:42 Jennifer Jennifer

And so, it's—again, it's like, you know, sobbing through *Far from Heaven*—which, I remember the person who I was watching it with turned to me and he was like—kept saying like, “Are you okay? Do you need to go?”

[*April laughs.*]

[*Voice strained as though crying.*] I was like, “I'm fine! I just! I'm fine!”

You know? And then, with *Safe* just being kind of like, “Ooh, I'm just—I'm for sure gonna barf, everybody.”

And, you know—and that, the assumption, like, “Oh so you hated it.”

And like, “No, I loved it! Let's—I'm gonna watch it again?”

00:15:05 Crosstalk Crosstalk

Jennifer: You know? [*Laughs.*]

April: Yes. Skin-crawling.

00:15:07 April Host

Jennifer: When's the next showing? Yeah!

And, you know, I should share a quote that Haynes said, about Julianne Moore—her character—is, quote, “There are many more people like her in the world than the ones with strong personalities we're used to seeing on film. People aren't taught to project themselves in dynamic, articulate ways. And most people aren't gorgeous or absolutely sure of who they are. I know that I make films. I'm an artist. But there are times when I don't really know who I am. The unconscious assumption of who we are and what we're here for—those questions are fragile in most people's minds. There are times when that unconscious self of our selves slips through our fingers.”

00:15:40 Jennifer Guest

Oh, that's—yeah. That's really brilliant. And that's something that I—that I was thinking about on the—in the last comment that I made, that even though Carol White is a really, like—she's like braille and butter, you know? She's an unknowable character. But it clearly—you know, Haynes, who constructed her, loves her and

cares about her deeply. And I feel like she's—again, even though she's this unknowable character, she's extremely dimensional and complex, in my—in my view. As opposed to another character and another film that also feels unknowable, that somehow just remains really flat and unidimensional, you know?

And I think that as a—as someone who, you know, loves to experience strong, female characters—both in my real life and... and my film life, Carol White's—her, like... dimensionality, you know? It doesn't come from this, you know, determination and self-possession and typical, kind of, strength. It's much more—it's much more normal and nuanced. And the sense—and the fact that she—the fact that she—her arc is so dramatic and that, maybe at the end, what we realize is that—you know—she can't turn back. She will never go back to that other—the life at the hair salon.

00:17:06 Crosstalk Crosstalk

April: Mm-hm.

Jennifer: Or the, you know, the teal couch world.

April: Yeah. She won't change.

Jennifer: She will never.

April: She—

00:17:13 Jennifer Guest

Jennifer: Forever changed.

And in that way, then—man, I feel like that's how I've found the feminism, in a way, in this—you know—in this film. That she is forever changed and will never ever return to that, even if she continues to—you know—spiral downwards. Although, I don't know how more down you can go from where she is, at the end. Although, there is the—the other character in the film who I like a lot, whose—his name is Philip. Is it Philip? Who's the completely covered, um...

00:17:38 April Host

Oh, I think that is—yeah.

00:17:40 Jennifer Guest

Character who you just see kind of awkwardly walking in the—

00:17:43 Crosstalk Crosstalk

April: He's like the cover in the criterion, I believe.

Jennifer: In the—*[laughs]* in the background. I mean, maybe that's... the next phase, for her.

00:17:49 April Host

I think it is.

[Music begins to fade in lowly in the background.]

There's always places to go. We're gonna take a quick break. When we come back, we're gonna talk a little bit more about unknowable characters in your film, as well. And then some more of the choices that Julianne Moore is making. And also, the idea of making movies outside of LA. We'll be right back.

00:18:06 Music Music

"Switchblade Comb" by Mobius VanChocStraw.

00:18:10 Promo Promo

Music: Dreamy keyboard music.

Jesse Thorn: This week, on *Bullseye*: Lin-Manuel Miranda on *His Dark Materials*, hip-hop, and life after *Hamilton*.

Lin-Manuel Miranda: I know it's the *[chuckling through his words]* first line of my obituary. So, if that line is handled, then what else can I do with my time, here?

00:18:30 Music Music
00:18:37 April Host
00:18:41 Crosstalk Crosstalk
00:18:42 April Host

Jesse: It's *Bullseye*, from MaximumFun.org and NPR. "Switchblade Comb" by Mobius VanChocStraw.

Welcome back to *Switchblade Sisters*. I'm April Wolfe and I'm joined today by Jennifer Reeder. And we're talking about:

April & Jennifer: *Safe!*

[Delighted.] Yes! That's the first time someone's said it with me! I love it! I feel like we're in sync, Jennifer.

[Jennifer agrees.]

I wanna get back to the idea of the unknowable character. How can you have an unknowable character who was also dynamic? Who could be extremely weak, but is also dynamic to watch onscreen? Your movie has a lot of these characters and—I'm thinking specifically of your mother character. There's a girl who is—we're not quite sure what happens to her, but we are—like, we kind of see something happen to her. And so, this girl never comes home. There's, like, a missing girl in the story and we're looking for her—like, who she is, where is she. And her mother is slowly unraveling. But she's just kind of, um—I don't wanna describe her as like a *Stepford Wife*, but she is very calm and restrained. But she's also losing her mind.

[Jennifer agrees.]

00:19:36 Jennifer Guest

Can you talk about how you, kind of, make that character work? Sure! So... I mean, I really think—in real life—most people are... unless, well—including ourselves—are unknowable, right? So, then you have to, kind of, look for the—look for the clues around them and, kind of, even going back to what Haynes was saying about the—you know—how we know Carol White. We know her through her environment. I feel like I've tried to adapt that in so many of my films. Because people don't tell you who they are. You have to find out who they are.

[April agrees several times as Jennifer speaks.]

And even... you know, and people sort of show you who they are in certain circumstances, you know? And there's all sorts of things that happened—that happen in one's private life while one is completely solitary, and that's maybe where the knowable things happen. And no one else gets to see them. And I think that, you know, the mom characters, in this film... I wanted to borrow a little bit from moms in most films. Which are also very one-dimensional. You know? They're this—these, kind of... peripheral... like a peripheral role that you don't really ever get to know. And they don't really propel the story forward, so who cares? I mean, they could be there or not be there. And oftentimes they're daffy, wet-blankets.

So... I wanted to make some moms that were—that were difficult, in a way *[stammering]* unpenetrable. Because I also think that, both in real life and cinematically—and maybe we'll just start with real life—

there's some kind of assumption that happens when a woman becomes a mother about her... her capacity to care. And I just think that there are a lot of women who feel totally ambivalent about motherhood, or even resentful about motherhood, and realizing—and realizing that they're bad at caring? And that—or that caring is—you have to learn how to care. You have to learn how to nurture. And so, there's this—there's just this sense that somehow mothers—um, yeah. Have this ability to kind of wrap the care around you and in that way—you know—lose themselves in that gesture.

And so, they really—they are only, you know, sympathetic—maybe bordering on empathetic—and their needs and, you know, don't have—like, wash away the moment that they become a mother, because all of their energy becomes focused on their children. And—which is like, *[groaning]* “Uuuh.” That's a real problematic, you know, way to think about motherhood. Both in real life and in films. And so, I wanted to try to write—even though my characters are *[stammering]*—they still hover above reality.

00:22:29 Jennifer Guest

I actually wanted to try and write some moms that actually felt a little more authentic. That were a little closed, a little more opaque, a little more inaccessible. Are... *[stammering]* yes, ambivalent to motherhood, if not completely resisting it. Or, conversely, with the—one of the characters who is pregnant—that's all I'll say about her—is... her, actually—she's actually consumed by her role as a potential mother. But it's also part of her psychosis that has nothing to do with her ability to nurture or care, right?

And I think about Lisa Harper, who's Caroline Harper's mother, and the way that she is—

00:23:18 April Host
00:23:20 Jennifer Guest

And Caroline Harper is the missing girl. Caroline Harper's the missing girl. And—you know—I just was thinking about what—the unspeakable horror of not knowing where your child is. And still having to function in the—in the world, through that. And...

00:23:35 April Host
00:23:37 Crosstalk Crosstalk

Especially when you're not, like, the super-mom.
Jennifer: Oh—yeah.

April: You know? Like, she's—like, very sad about it, but it's just, like... you know. She's not—she's not the kind of sad that you would see on the news, necessarily.

Jennifer: Not—no.

00:23:51 April Host

April: It would be, like, appropriately sad. I wanna get into some of these performance choices that we're getting, because one—okay, uh... one is that Todd Haynes felt that Julianne Moore was the only one who had the—kind of—restraint, of the actors that he saw, that he needed from her. That he would, you know, like what you were saying—just kind of, like, let her slowly appear on the screen.

And he said, quote, “I think she understood it completely, in an innate way. Her approach is not to overly theorize what she's doing or to do tons of method preparation. Her courage, as an actress, was in knowing how little to do to communicate Carol's paralysis.

This is something many actors don't understand. Some people can't open their mouths very big, can't move their eyes very far, can't move their necks very far, when they're suffering from MCS. There are reasons why each of these things is blocked or limited, and that's something for an actor to use. But instead of demonstrating all the blockages and all the limitations, she was so incredibly secure about how to approach it."

So, it was very small things. There's a really wonderful scene, for instance, where she's just having like a little lunch with her girlfriend. And she's explaining to her, like, kind of in rambling sentences:

00:25:04 Clip

Clip

[The sounds of outdoors: passing cars, calling birds, a general low-level noise in the background.]

Carol: And you know our couch? Our beautiful new couch?

Linda: Yeah!

Carol: Totally toxic.

Linda: Really?

Carol: Yeah.

Linda: Wow.

Carol: I know. So... um... it's hard. Like, I, um—I can't wear makeup, anymore.

Linda: *[Quietly]* God.

Carol: Ruins my eyes. I get sick.

Linda: Well. I guess one good thing is just how it's made you so much more knowledgeable on food and everything? And chemicals?

00:25:37

April

Host

Carol: That's true.

And she's just kind of, like, rambling and she can see that her friend is uncomfortable. And she's also in pain. Like, Carol's in pain and she's just trying to be in the outside world. And there's just these tiny tics.

[Jennifer agrees.]

There's—it's not, like, a big—like, she's not being like, *[dramatically]* "Ooh, ooh," groaning and, like, rubbing herself or something. She's very... restrained and kept inside, still. Like it's—she's true to her character, still.

00:26:04

Jennifer

Guest

Right. And then I think that that's what—I mean, in even the smallness of her voice, you know? The—in, um... this little, soft voice that she speaks in almost the whole time that's like a little—yeah, that's like, sort of, chirpy and unsure. Um... it's—I mean, it's just—it's really extraordinary, those little moments. And I do think

that there's something that's just about Julianne as—Julianne Moore's face, in general.

[April agrees several times as Jennifer speaks.]

She's got one of those kind of faces where her mouth never—doesn't close naturally. You know? Or that's what it seems like. I've never met her, in person, to test that out.

[April laughs.]

You know. But there's something about that that I've always been fascinated by—that, sort of, facial structure of someone who—their resting—their resting face is like an open mouth face, you know? Which makes them seem, like, curious and wondering and absorbing, you know? When maybe that's not the case, at all. There's like a different—so even though her character is, yes, super restrained, that kind of way that she—her resting face is still like an open-mouthed face, is—makes her also feel—seem, like, really, like, vulnerable and as though she's experiencing every moment for the very first time. Which kind of—

00:27:24 April Host
00:27:26 Jennifer Guest

Yeah, she's a mewling kitten! You know?

Yeah! *[Laughs.]* For sure! And then it makes those moments—like when she has the kind of seizure at the baby shower—you know, just so, like, monstrous. Like she becomes a monster.

[April agrees.]

In that scene. And she's a—and she is a monster in a way, at the end, because—like—she's physically transformed. You know? She seems to be, at least. You know. Like, so much thinner and more fragile and—yeah, she's got this developing head-wound. Like, she really is all of the—all of her—all of that restraint. Everything that started from—well, before she was born. It's like it's slowly beginning to ooze out of her and she's a really—a monster, at the end.

00:28:10 April Host

Even though, again, it's like *[laughing]* extremely subtle. Yeah, she is the monster in this horror story, we'll say.

[Music begins to fade in.]

We're gonna take another quick break. When we come back, we're gonna—we're gonna talk a little bit more about some process stuff. With crews, getting your DPs together, how a movie gets made. We'll be right back.

00:28:26 Music Music
00:28:31 Promo Promo

"Switchblade Comb" by Mobius VanChocStraw.

Jesse Thorn: Hey. It's Jesse Thorn. We're very happy to announce that tickets for MaxFunCon 2020 will go on sale Friday, November 29th, at 11AM Pacific. I also wanna let you know: this coming year, MaxFunCon 2020 will be our last MaxFunCon for the foreseeable future. For 2020 and beyond, we're gonna be looking for ways to connect with more of you in person and spread the spirit of MaxFun farther than it's ever gone before. In the meantime, if you wanna join us at the last MaxFunCon in Lake Arrowhead, June 12th through the 14th, you can find details at [MaxFunCon.com](https://www.maxfuncon.com).

00:29:10	Music	Music	“Switchblade Comb” by Mobius VanChocStraw plays for several moments, then stops.
00:29:16	April	Host	Welcome back to <i>Switchblade Sisters</i> . I’m April Wolfe, and I’m joined today by Jennifer Reeder. And we’re talking about—
00:29:20	Crosstalk	Crosstalk	April & Jennifer: <i>[Slightly out of sync.] Safe.</i>
00:29:22	April	Host	Okay, so—here’s something that Todd Haynes had a problem with, while trying to get this movie made. He said, quote, “I wanted to work with New York DP, Maryse Alberti, who had shot <i>Poison</i> and <i>Dottie Gets Spanked</i> , but she was pregnant at the time. So, I started talking to people in LA. The differences between New York and LA, particularly in low-budget filmmaking, became clearer and clearer to me. The LA mentality is dominated by the industry in every possible way. It’s all by the money. So, we ended up hiring the people who work for \$850 a week. Basically, the LA exploitation crews.”
			So, all of <i>Safe</i> was done by people who were usually just doing, you know, sex work stuff in the Valley, for a while. And then, like, some folks who kind of were trying to break further into the industry. But yeah, like, they weren’t in the unions or anything.
00:30:12	Crosstalk	Crosstalk	Jennifer: Unbelievable.
00:30:13	April	Host	April: And they just had to get it.
00:30:18	Jennifer	Guest	I think he had a million-dollar budget, for this movie. That’s unbelievable.
00:30:19	April	Host	<i>[Jennifer agrees several times as April speaks.]</i> That Christine Vachon got for him. Always his biggest champion. And, to me, I think that’s a really interesting thing about this. Because the movie is very much LA. It is very much San Fernando Valley and this particular type of Valley-ness. And—but to make it, here, he really had to, kind of, pull a lot of strings. It wasn’t—it wasn’t an easy process to get it outside of the industry.
			Your film, too. I mean, like—I know in Q&As before, you’ve talked a little bit about the fact that people said you weren’t gonna be able to get all the actors that you needed in Chicago. Clearly you got all these actors. There’s talent everywhere. Talent exists everywhere. It’s not always just in Los Angeles, as we find when these wonderful people crop up. But you’re still fighting against people saying that, like, you need the best. You need this. You need Maryse Alberti doing this. You know?
00:31:17	Jennifer	Guest	Right. No, and—you know—uh, I live in Chicago. I wanted to shoot it in Chicago. I wanted to go home at the end of the day and sleep in my own bed, like a normal person. And I’ve shot a bunch of shorts in Chicago, and so I knew that there was crew there. And more and more it’s—well, it’s much easier to shoot something in Chicago than it was—to—right now, than it was ten years ago.
			<i>[April agrees several times as Jennifer speaks.]</i>
			For better, for worse, because of the—there’s a lot of TV that’s being shot in Chicago, now. So, there’s more, you know, people who are graduating from those film schools are staying in Chicago, rather than going to New York or LA. And so, there’s skilled crew. And Chicago has always been a theatre town that has amazing

performers, you know? So—and I’ve worked a lot with theatre people and even improv comedy people, from Chicago, who have never—it’s never been a directing issue where I can’t, kind of, get their performances down for the camera. You know?

00:32:17 April Host Yeah. A lot of people are just like, “Oh no! It’s too much work, because there are—they’re too big for the stage and they can’t adjust.”

00:32:22 Crosstalk Crosstalk **April:** But it’s like, “Weeell, I mean…”

Jennifer: I feel like that’s your fault, as the director. You know? That’s never been—

April: What do you tell them to adjust? Like, what’s your—what are your magic words?

00:32:29 Jennifer Guest **Jennifer:** Well, I’ve never even had to!
[April agrees intermittently as Jennifer talks.]

You know, I mean, it’s—never even had to. Like, those—because, I mean, right now the people who were in *Knives and Skin*, a lot of them have a lot of TV and film experience, now. So, they kind of do a little bit of both. So, they know—they, like, know what their faces do when a camera is three inches—

And they know what to do when they’re on—I mean, they’re actors. They’re professionals. So, they also know what to do when they’re on a stage and they have to hit the back of the room. But, for me—theatre actors and even improv comedy—comedians are—they are… they are used to performing in front of a lot of people. So, that kind of risk and ability to, sort of, put it out there in a live environment I think makes them, you know—there’s like an edge, there? That I think I—

00:33:11 April Host There’s a fearlessness.

00:33:12 Jennifer Guest A fearlessness! Exactly! That’s the word I was looking for. So, then when you write these kind of off characters—I mean, everybody who read the script—no one said, “I just—I can’t—I don’t understand this character.” Or “I don’t wanna play someone that’s that opaque or weird.” Or something.

00:33:29 Crosstalk Crosstalk **Jennifer:** I mean, they were just like, “Yes! Let’s get into it!”

April: Theatre people are weird! Yeah!

00:33:33 Jennifer Guest **Jennifer:** Yeah, people are weird! Humans are weird! But I loved the fearlessness of the—of the people in this film and the—also, I think because all of them are used to performing live, they can kind of call up a change in character. You know. Like that! Right? Everything is just right there, under the surface. I mean, I feel like they’re not good people to date, because of that. You know?

[April agrees and laughs.]

[Chuckling] But, cast them!

00:33:57 April Host Don’t watch *Knives and Skin* to date the cast!

00:34:00 Jennifer Guest It’s not a dating app, you know.

00:34:03 April Host I wanted to bring up the fact that Todd Haynes, on looking back on *Safe*, he was thinking about the process in which he was working with specific actors, throughout his career. When he made *Carol*, specifically, he was talking about working in Cincinnati and hiring people from Cincinnati to be his background and that there was something that was really fluid and wonderful and natural about them that you didn't get from a lot of background actors, in LA—who felt very stiff and wooden and couldn't perform simple tasks, because they were trying to think about how it looks on camera.

And, you know, he—you know—also talked a little bit about *Poison*, one of his earlier films. And he said, quote, "All the speaking parts were actors, in *Safe*. Unlike *Poison*, where I used a combination of actors and non-actors. I think I'm spoiled for life the quality of the actors I worked with. They brought that sense of reality to everything they did. Even the extra who my brother Sean cast were excellent, because extras have to act too. Directors forget. There's always that species of extra, in movies, who are so wooden."

And he's talking about *Safe*, he said, "My nurse, however, couldn't spray the spray can. I just kept shooting her over and over again and it took so much time away."

00:35:09 Jennifer Guest Oh lord.
00:35:10 Crosstalk Guest **April:** 'Cause he had to cast, you know, someone who was... not an actual nurse.

Jennifer: Mm-hm.

April: And then he was just like, "If I could do it again, I would probably—like—fire her, just bring in a—"

Jennifer: Cast a nurse!

April: Like, is there a medic on set who could step in and just do this and you're my nurse now?

00:35:26 Jennifer Guest **Jennifer:** Yeah. I loved working a combination. *[April agrees several times as Jennifer speaks.]*

In the shorts I made leading up to *Knives and Skin*—which are all on Vimeo—I loved working it with a combination of professional, trained actors and non-actors. And oftentimes the non-actors are the young—are young people who—sometimes they have had a little bit of experience in, like, the high school musical. Or they have a band with their friends. So, they at least have an idea of like—that their bodies exist in space. You know? And that their face is emotive.

But their reactions are really authentic, and so putting two people in a room together, like a really experienced—maybe adult—actor who can draw out something very subtle and interesting and genuine in a non-actor—and then the non-actor, kind of, giving a line in an unexpected way, to the professional actor, that makes them genuinely... you know, say their lines in a way that feels all really—feels authentic. That combination is my favorite.

00:36:32	April	Host	I wanna talk a little bit about what Todd Haynes calls his idea of keeping what every other Hollywood film would cut out. He said, quote, “ <i>Safe</i> won’t have that effect on everyone, but I did feel my own frustration with the volume and aggressivity of current Hollywood film practice, where each film has to out-shriek, outpace the next. And the amount of histrionics and technological gimmickry and assault that each film displays, one-upping the next, again and again. I walk out of those films absolutely numb, feeling nothing. Because they assume everything. Whereas a Chantal Akerman film is a real inspiration, because it’s so restrained and resistant. What you see in it, in real time, is what every other movie would cut out. But it creates a suspense and curiosity and a huge role for the viewer, in the telling.”
00:37:18	Jennifer	Guest	Oh, 100%. I mean, in <i>Safe</i> in particular, the pacing is excruciating and so patient. And the framing is very specific. You know? It’s almost shot like a—like a stage play.
00:37:30	April	Host	I have a good quote about this. He said, “The basic, almost funny restriction that we placed on ourselves was this restrained coverage and distance from the character. The joke was: okay, let’s move in for a close up, but we never got very close. All of our proportions were appropriately adjusted from the starting point, which was very wide. Minimal camera movement.”
			So, <i>[laughs]</i> they like—they would joke—they would be like, “Let’s go on for a closeup!” But the closeup was just, like, the slooowest push-in. And you never actually get close. It’s just—but it’s still enough to be jarring, because even though you’re still far away from her, you’ve been <u>further</u> away from her, for so much longer. Just, like, patiently waiting to get closer.
00:38:09	Jennifer	Guest	Right, which I think is why that very—that very final scene, where it’s like, maybe we’re—maybe we are as close to her and that final scene as we have ever been. And it’s that nice, wide shot. She’s right in the center. It’s such a—it’s such a perfectly composed frame.
			<i>[April agrees.]</i>
			And, you know, she’s whispering, “I love you. I <u>really</u> love you.” It’s just—you can barely hear it. And, you know, the combination of those three things, again. Like, it just, like... then that’s, you know—the nausea kicks in and doesn’t let up for the next 24 hours. But again, it’s not—you’re not that—you know, <i>[laughs]</i> it’s like, “Stay five feet from everybody.”
00:38:46	April	Host	Yeah!
00:38:47	Jennifer	Guest	And even—and even the sort of, like—and even the—but that does, that makes that—I mean, I love also that Philip character that you see kind of walking. There’s, like, nice, big, wide landscape. And he’s walking with that crazy—that real particular, kind of, awkwardness through the landscape. All you wanna do is get closer to that character and sort of check out what he’s wearing and figure out what his deal is. And Todd Haynes won’t let you, you know? It’s that kind of—
00:39:13	April	Host	Like, we never get to know that person.
00:39:14	Jennifer	Guest	<u>Never</u> . And keeping something—keeping all of that at a distance, I think actually—for me, at least, as the audience member for this film—just drew me in. You know, I’m a really nosy person and I... I

can be a—kind of a follower and not like a close-getter-upper. Like, my instinct, in real life also, is to kind of go through somebody's medicine cabinet.

[April laughs and agrees.]

And look in their refrigerator, you know? Judge their book collection or judge if they don't have books, even more. You know? Judge how they wind the cables onset. And so, I want—I always wanna get closer. And so, Todd Haynes does this really great way of creating that want in you, but never—but never giving it to you. You know? And so, then you're left just as, kind of, gutted at the—at the end, but still deeply satisfied.

00:40:04 April Host And, you know, just—like, the one last thing that I'll share before we go is the fact that... this was filmed during the big Northridge earthquake.

00:40:14 Jennifer Guest Ooooh.

00:40:15 April Host In LA. Very close to the epicenter. And it was something that was leaking and bleeding through into the movie of *Safe*, because it felt like there was just a general paranoia, onset. Todd Haynes said that the place that he was staying, in the apartment with his producers and his DP, across the street had turned into an emergency shelter and a water station. And it was just—it was constantly a huge thing of fear and that while they were filming, there were aftershocks.

There's that moment where Julianne Moore's delivering a kind of rambling speech at the end of her birthday celebration. And you get these reactions of Peter Friedman and Kate McGregor—who played Peter and Clair—and James Le Gros, as well. And they're all looking at her and what's happening, during that scene, is there is a huge aftershock. It was one of the biggest aftershocks. And so, you can almost see a kind of vibrational effect, on the screen, as that's happening. The only other person I can think of who's actually used that kind of earthquake thing is Peter Weir in *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, who also uses aftershocks and earthquakes in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and embraces the kind of shakiness that that was happening, onscreen.

00:41:26 Jennifer Guest Oh, that's fascinating.

00:41:27 April Host And I thought that was, you know, like—real life is bleeding through.

00:41:31 Jennifer Guest Right.

00:41:32 April Host Into the movie.

00:41:33 Jennifer Guest Well, I was gonna say one more quick thing—is that, also that—you know—this film, even though it was made, you know, in the mid-90's, is supposed to take place in the mid-80's. Right? And so—*New York Times* famously said that it took place in a future world. And Todd Haynes was just like, "This was 1987, everything looks like—" But they thought it was a future world.

00:41:51 Jennifer Guest *[Teasingly, with a transatlantic accent.]* "What are—what are these floral pastels and puffy shoulders that we shall—that will turn into wings, in the future?"

00:41:57 April Host Yeah.

00:41:58 Jennifer Guest But, there's something—and of course, there's like that sense of that—of the... There's a character who really—who, one of her friends, right, talks about the—the—who is the relative who died? And it's—and it's like an unspeakable death, right?

[April agrees.]

00:42:15	April	Host	And we sort of imagine that they're talking about AIDS and the AIDS crisis. And... 'Cause they are. Yeah.
00:42:16	Jennifer	Guest	<i>[April agrees several times as Jennifer talks.]</i> Right. And so, there's something that's so, also, really—thinking about the film through that—through the lens of what was happening, you know, culturally and politically during the 80's that doesn't—that's never pointed to, directly.
00:42:29	Crosstalk	Crosstalk	Jennifer: But it <u>is</u> that kind of—it is the earthquake underneath the film, where it's that hazy, pink—you know, cloud that's over the entire film. April: This is an AIDS movie! Jennifer: It's an AIDS movie. April: It is absolutely an AIDS movie. Jennifer: Right. Yeah. April: It was meant to be an AIDS movie. And it was supposed to be a backlash to anyone who said that you are responsible for your own bad health. And... 00:42:46 Jennifer Guest Right. Yes! So, how do you—so, it's like if you—if you were to describe that and say like, "Oh, let's go see <i>Safe</i> . It's a—it's an—it's a horror, AIDS movie." And then that's what you get? You would never imagine those things. 00:42:56 Crosstalk Crosstalk April: You'd go, "What?!" <i>[Laughs.]</i> Jennifer: Mm-hm. April: Okay. That was—that's a good place to stop off, I would say. Jennifer: Sure. April: Uh, Jennifer. Again, people can see <i>Knives and Skin</i> , in the US, December 6 th . And in what cities? In all cities? Yeah, so it's about 25 cities, right now. New York or LA. Chicago, Boston, Seattle. All the Drafthouses. So, if you live in any corner of Texas, it's coming to you. <i>[April agrees.]</i> Places also like Denver and Tallahassee. Mentor, Ohio. Columbus, Ohio. Cleveland, Ohio. 00:43:28 April Host Ohio was represented! 00:43:30 Jennifer Guest Ohio was represented. But it'll be on—yeah, IFCs, VOD, but it'll be on iTunes, also, for the first 90 days. Then Hulu. 00:43:40 April Host And then some international stuff, too. I know it's gonna be big in France. 00:43:43 Crosstalk Crosstalk Jennifer: Big! In! France!

April: We already know that. Big! In! France!

Music: “Switchblade Comb” by Mobius VanChocStraw begins to fade in.

April: Jennifer Reeder, *Knives and Skin*—big in France. Thank you so much for coming and talking to me, today.

00:43:49 April Host

Jennifer: Thank you, April.

And thank you for listening to *Switchblade Sisters*! If you like what you’re hearing, please leave us a five-star review on Apple Podcasts. If you do, I’ll read it on air. We’ve got one from EditorMomLady—I like that name—“Smart women talking about fascinating and weird movies. This speaks right to me. I love it so much.” Well, we love you.

If you want to let us know what you think of the show, you can tweet at us [@SwitchbladePod](https://twitter.com/SwitchbladePod) or email us at SwitchbladeSisters@MaximumFun.org. And please check out our Facebook group. That’s [Facebook.com/groups/switchbladesisters](https://www.facebook.com/groups/switchbladesisters). Our producer is Casey O’Brien. Our senior producer is Laura Swisher, and this is a production of [MaximumFun.org](https://www.MaximumFun.org).

00:44:28 Clip Clip
00:44:29 Music Music
00:44:30 Speaker 1 Guest
00:44:32 Speaker 2 Guest
00:44:33 Speaker 3 Guest
00:44:34 Speaker 4 Guest

[Music ends.]

Carol White: Totally toxic.

A cheerful guitar chord.

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