

99 Erics

a Kat Cataclysm faux novel



by Julia Serano

99 Erics

a Kat Cataclysm faux novel

by julia serano



Switch Hitter Press
Oakland, California

99 ERICS

a Kat Cataclysm faux novel

Copyright © 2020 Julia Serano

Published by Switch Hitter Press

PO Box 11133, Oakland, CA 94611-1133

www.switchhitter.net

book cover design by Delphine Sevrain at Mean Child Studio

book layout & design by Julia Serano

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without the written permission of the author, except where permitted by law.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Where the names of actual celebrities, locales, businesses, or corporate entities or products appear, they are used for fictional purposes, and do not constitute assertions of fact. Any resemblance to real events or actual persons, living and/or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication Data

(provided by Five Rainbows Cataloging Services)

Names: Serano, Julia, author.

Title: 99 Erics : a Kat Cataclysm faux novel / Julia Serano.

Description: Oakland, CA : Switch Hitter Press, 2020. | Also available in audiobook format.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019918543 (print) | ISBN 978-0-9968810-4-3 (paperback) | ISBN 978-0-9968810-5-0 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Dating (Social customs)--Fiction. | Bisexual women--Fiction. | Sexual minorities--Fiction. | Satire. | Humorous fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / LGBT / Bisexual. | FICTION / Women. | FICTION / Humorous / General. | FICTION / Absurdist. | GSAFD: Humorous fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3619.E73 A12 2020 (print) | LCC PS3619.E73 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6--dc23.

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 BLAST OFF!!!

Dedication

*In loving memory of Buddy
my dear Nanday Conure
who passed away in March 2018
just as I was finishing up this manuscript*

*She was the sweetest entity I have ever known
my best friend and my constant companion
for thirteen-plus years*

*Whenever I would write
Buddy was almost always perched on my right shoulder as I typed*

*Losing her was like losing a part of me
so now I am lying on my proverbial bed like a lump
waiting for my body to physiologically change*

*I miss her so much
and I will forever cherish the shards of memories
that I still have of her
and I won't be the same person without her*

Table of Contents

1. Eric Number One . . .	1
2. Materials and Methods . . .	4
3. Lady Parts . . .	10
4. Bomb . . .	16
5. Patronizing . . .	21
6. Benevolent Dictator . . .	25
7. My Very First Blog Post . . .	31
8. Why the Internet Is Like the Worst Thing Ever . . .	33
9. Like . . .	42
10. Publishers Clearing House . . .	45
11. Laypeople . . .	53
12. Fan Fiction . . .	55
13. Socially Constructed Ice Cream . . .	63
14. Children of the Corndog . . .	66
15. Easter Eggs . . .	74
16. Posers . . .	83
17. Ethical Slut vs. Confused Slut . . .	91
18. I've Misplaced Chekhov's Gun . . .	95
19. Shopping Carts, Part One . . .	99
20. Content . . .	108
21. Punching Versus Sprucing . . .	118
22. Banana Slug of a Different Color . . .	119

23. For All Intents and Purposes . . .	126
24. Shopping Carts, Part Two . . .	132
25. Writing About Sex Is Like Praying About Agnosticism . . .	138
26. Ménage à Trois . . .	144
27. Gut Feelings . . .	147
28. Law of Averages . . .	155
29. By Her Bootstraps . . .	158
30. Origin Story . . .	162
31. Good Grief . . .	171
32. Book Cover . . .	176
33. The One & Only Writing Tip You Will Ever Need . . .	181
34. Textbook Answers . . .	185
35. Freudian Slip . . .	191
36. Worst Eric Ever . . .	198
37. Emotionally Labored . . .	199
38. Bad Actor . . .	203
39. Days of Future Passed . . .	210
40. Great Expectations . . .	214
41. Technologically Sound . . .	221
42. Trombone Lessons . . .	229
43. Home Base . . .	233
44. And the Rest . . .	245
45. Stet . . .	251
46. Book Tour . . .	253
47. Dénouement . . .	265

1. Eric Number One

I always wanted to be a novelist. Like, ever since I was twenty-six. I even bought all these how-to books on the subject, and they all said the same thing: Put your characters into conflict! And not just once or twice. But like, in *every single chapter!*

And I am the queen of conflict avoidance. When my friends suggest trying out some new German restaurant, I'll cheerily say "sure," and I will actually sit there and eat the red cabbage and spätzle just to avoid a potential disagreement. So I couldn't possibly fathom spending hours upon hours creating complex characters with well-fleshed-out backstories only to perpetually make their lives miserable. I simply couldn't do it.

This is why I write absurdist short fiction. So I can tell the tale of the woman who has kidneys the size of kidney beans, or the scientists searching for a cure for "sad cow disease," or the mountain climber who ascended their way out of the uncanny valley, without having to delve into the whole "conflict thing."

But the problem is, when you tell people you're a writer, they always ask the follow up, "So what do you write?" They do this because they fancy themselves as readers. And they are inevitably disappointed when you tell them you write absurdist short fiction. They're all like, "What the hell is *that?*" They don't even seem to care when you mention that you won the 2014 *Absurdist Weekly Review* Flash Fiction Award.

Then I got a brilliant idea: Perhaps if I sought out a bad relationship—like a *really* bad one—it would force me to deal with

conflict in my real life, which in turn might help me with novel writing. After much consideration, I decided my best bet was to seek out an indie rock guitarist, since guitarists are notoriously egotistical, and indie rockers are all emotionally detached and unbearably ironic. The plan seemed foolproof.

After paging through the listings of the local alternative weekly music section, I decided to target a band called The Orange Dolphin Puppet Revival, for obvious reasons. At their show, before they took the stage, I saw this guy with disheveled hair painstakingly tuning like four or five guitars. I figured he had to be the one. So I went up to him and I kissed him, completely out of the blue. He asked me my name and I said Kat. He told me his was Eric. I asked him if he felt like his name was some kind of underlying cause of him becoming an indie rocker—perhaps if his parents had named him “Rick” he might be playing rockabilly or speed metal instead? Eric didn’t find this funny. But he still seemed interested in me. Probably because I was all flirty: I bit my lip, fidgeted with my sweater, giggled a lot. Basically, I acted like an insecure ninth-grader. Many supposedly grown men seem to like this.

After the show, I took Eric home with me. I was hoping he would, you know, fuck me, then ignore me, then say mean things to me when I asked why he wasn’t returning my calls. Not because I’m a masochist. (Okay, maybe a little bit because I’m a masochist.) But mostly, as part of my self-imposed experimental overcoming-conflict-avoidance therapy. But that didn’t happen with Eric. Instead, he just sort of followed me around like a lost puppy for a week or two. He opened doors for me, did my dishes, and so on, when what I actually needed was for him to treat me really really badly. So that I could become a novelist.

Finally, I told Eric I wasn’t interested in him. He was crushed. As he was sobbing on my shoulder, I expressed my surprise, because indie rockers are supposed to be aloof hipsters detached from real-life human emotions. This only made him cry more,

because according to Eric, The Orange Dolphin Puppet Revival are not an indie rock band after all. They're an *emo* band, which is apparently a totally different thing.

Everything turned out okay though. Eric wrote a song called "Kat" about how I broke his heart, and it reached as high as number twenty-three on the college radio charts. And my new book *99 Erics*—about dating ninety-nine different pathetic guys named Eric—is currently ranked 25,097 on Amazon, which is like pretty good for a collection of absurdist short stories.

2. Materials and Methods

Remember way back, when you first moved to the city where you now currently live. And how everything seemed so new and shiny and exciting—it was an untainted place, chock-full of possibilities. And shortly after moving there, you met the most amazing person, and the two of you soon became inseparable: You were lovers and best friends, and together you explored every nook and cranny of this place. You ended up being together for a long time—like almost four years. But eventually, you both wanted different things out of life, so you split up, as people sometimes do.

They have since moved away, but you still remain in this city that is no longer new and shiny. And every day, you pass by places that conjure up memories from that special time in your life: “There’s the apartment building where we first moved in together, the one with the uneven floor.” “There’s the laundromat-slash-comedy-venue where we went on our second date.” “There’s that weird blob-like statue that we always used to make fun of.” And even though many years have passed, and you have had numerous lovers and a few significant others since, long-lost moments from that once special relationship still haunt you wherever you go.

Do you know that feeling?

Well that’s how I feel all the time. But only with Eric.

Like, whenever I walk by that trendy restaurant in the Mission—the one that is way too expensive for a place that features sliders and mac & cheese on their menu—but Eric #23 insisted we go, because money means nothing to him, because he’s

not barely scraping by a living as a writer. And during the meal, he just goes on and on about the supposedly environmentally friendly start-up company he recently started up. And he is so proud of himself—you know, for being both an environmentalist and a highly successful capitalist, which in his mind are somehow not contradictory things—that he didn’t even once ask me what I do. Not once! Then afterwards, when we split the bill, he boasted about how he would write off his half of the meal as a business expense since he talked about his start-up during dinner.

And now, I can’t help but think about Eric #23 every time I walk down that particular block of Valencia Street.

Or that craft beer bar near Jack London Square, where I met Eric #59. And I have to say that I hate the term “craft” almost as much as I hate the word “artisanal,” but they really do have tons of amazing beers at this place, no joke. Before meeting in person, this particular Eric and I had chatted about our mutual appreciation of IPAs, and knowing this place would have a great selection, I suggested it. But upon meeting there, he immediately started complaining about how the place was a bit too “divey” for his tastes, even though there was no piss all over the bathroom floors, or lonely old men in the corner of the bar drinking themselves into oblivion. In fact, it was a bar full of relatively happy people in the primes of their lives paying seven dollars and up for difficult-to-find craft beers that they immensely enjoyed. Seriously, Charles Bukowski wouldn’t be caught dead in a place like this! If he wasn’t dead already, I mean. And then it dawns on me: Eric #59 probably thinks this place is divey because of the punk music they’re playing on the stereo. So now I’m trying really hard not to judge this Eric based on his stereotyping of an entire genre of music, when he suddenly starts coughing and gesturing toward his neck. He’s choking on the complimentary bar nuts, so it becomes my duty to perform the Heimlich maneuver. Which scares me shitless—I’ve never done this before. What if I hurt him? But I do it anyway, and

everything turns out okay. Except for our date, of course, which completely sucked.

And now, every time I pass that craft beer bar on my way to Buttercup, I can't help but think of Eric #59.

Or the Ruby Room, which is where I met several Erics, although Eric #47 was a standout. We had an awesome long rambling conversation. We talked at great length about the differences between introverted extroverts and extroverted introverts. He laughed at my story about Eric number one's emo band, and I laughed at his story about a San Diego-based black metal band who purposefully consumed rancid foods and mild poisons in order to make themselves ill (under the assumption that this was an especially Satanic thing to do), but then had to cancel their tour because they were all too sick to perform. Eventually, we started making out right there at the bar. (Me and Eric #47, not me and the San Diego-based black metal band, that is.) At one point, while sucking face, his dental crown came loose. He was really concerned at first. But he smiled when I apologized on behalf of my tongue. Later that night, we both cracked up when I called that moment one of my "crowning achievements," even though we both knew that it was the *worst pun ever*.

And now, every time I walk past that bar on my way to Lake Merritt, I can't help but think of Eric #47.

So let's get one thing straight: This is not a memoir. Okay? This book is not about overcoming adversity, nor have I gone on some Eat-Pray-Sleep type of journey. I just dated ninety-nine people named Eric, that's all. And unsurprisingly, I did not grow as a human being nor did I learn anything about myself in the process. Also, memoirs are supposedly based upon "real life" experiences, whereas these stories are heavily embellished, and frankly, some things are completely made up. Most writers wouldn't tell you that, but I just did. Just being honest here. About my making shit up.

And even though this venture began as part of my desperate attempt to become a novelist, this isn't really a novel. I've given up on all that. In addition to not being able to put my characters into conflict, I am also not a very visual person. So I'm no good at describing . . . things. Like, I would envision a scene with two characters, and all this amazing dialogue would spring to mind—the exchange would be funny and clever and weird, but in a good way. (Although none of it would help to move the story forward, which I suppose is another strike against me becoming a novelist.) But before I could actually sit down and write up this wonderful digression, I would get stuck on all the visual details: What do these people look like? How do I describe the room they are in? Is there a table in the room? Is there a tablecloth on the table? If so, what color is it? Which of these details are important to share and which are superfluous?

So I have given up. In this book, you will not be getting any passages like, “Kat brushed back her shoulder-length reddish-brown hair that would sometimes turn almost strawberry-blonde in the summertime, as she contemplated the leopard-print tablecloth. Its many leopard spots resembled a mad mob of amorphous eyeballs that seemed to be staring at her ominously, relentlessly.” I promise.

Another problem I have is that I first honed my writing chops in grad school (before I dropped out, but that's a whole 'nother story). It wasn't some sort of MFA program where your graduate thesis is an actual creative writing project. No, my thesis was in linguistics, which is like the hardest of all the soft sciences. And unlike creative writing, where breaking conventions is often celebrated (e.g., “Wow, the book begins at the end of the story and then works its way backwards!”; “Amazing, it is a series of six nested stories that initially appear to be unrelated, but over time you realize that they are all interconnected!”; “Egads, this is the best novel written from a second-person limited point of view that

I have ever read!”), academic papers have set-in-stone formats. And they always begin with an “abstract,” which is basically a one-paragraph summary where you tell readers what will happen over the course of the article. In other words, *you have to give away the ending right from the start*—no plot twists or unexpected turns of events allowed.

Unfortunately, these writing tendencies have become deeply ingrained in me. Take the title of this book for instance: *99 Erics*. See, I have already given away the total number of Erics that there will be. If I was a real novelist, I would have come up with a better title, something like: *An as of yet Undetermined Number of Erics*. Now that would really keep readers in suspense.

I have reluctantly come to accept that I am not, nor will I ever be, a real novelist. I am merely a faux novelist, and I am embracing that. And this right here—the very book that you are reading right now, at this very moment—is my first faux novel. It’s about the eponymous protagonist’s experiences writing a book about her supposed experiences dating ninety-nine different people named Eric. It will be more surreal than slutty. Not that there is anything wrong with slutty.

Now it’s time for me to preemptively address the three most common questions that I routinely receive with regards to this particular project:

1) Where did you meet all these Erics?

Well, I met a few of them serendipitously over the course of my day-to-day life. But given that only 0.068% of the U.S. population is named Eric (yes, I looked it up), resulting in a Meeting Erics by Random Chance (MERC) index of approximately 0.27 per year, this project would likely have taken about 400 years to complete if I left it up to happenstance. So for the most part, I placed personal ads on various online dating sites. Specifically looking for Erics.

2) I can’t believe you fucked ninety-nine guys named Eric!

So the operative criterion here is dating, not fucking. And

Merriam-Webster defines a date as “the oblong edible fruit of a palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*).” Oops, that’s no good. Wait a minute . . . okay, here: *Wikipedia* defines dating as “part of the human mating process whereby two people meet socially for companionship, beyond the level of friendship, or with the aim of each assessing the other’s suitability as a partner.” See, it says nothing about fucking. I merely dated an inordinate number of Erics in order to “assess their suitability.” And also, as part of this literary endeavor.

Although I did fuck a few of them.

3) Really? How many Erics did you fuck?

None of your fucking business! This is my faux novel, not yours. So shut up and let me do the talking . . .

3. Lady Parts

So upon deciding that I would date a multitude of Erics, my first stop was to my local sex toy store. Not because I envisioned requiring sex toys for my dating of Erics. But rather to visit my friend Eric, who works there. He is one of two Erics that I previously personally knew at the onset of this project, and he will subsequently be referred to as Eric #3.

For those of you who have never lived in a fairly progressive urban setting, I should make clear that this isn't one of those skeevey "adult stores" that you used to see along the sides of highways, where embarrassed-looking middle-aged men would slink into to buy their porn VHS tapes way back before all that shit became downloadable. No, this place is called Lady Parts, and it is a female-owned, sex-positive, all-genders-and-sexualities-welcome store where, as soon as you walk in, you are greeted by a smiling and completely non-judgmental person who will ask you if you need any help. They are always totally disarming and super-informed, and the next thing you know, you are having an intimate conversation with this stranger about how you hate the vibrators that have those weird pulse settings because you find them too distracting. Or how whenever you use those rabbit-style vibrators, instead of experiencing clitoral and vaginal stimulation simultaneously, you mostly just end up thinking about real-life bunny rabbits, which totally takes you out of the moment.

And sometimes you reminisce about how revelatory Lady Parts

seemed to you back when you were a young twenty-something who just moved to the big city. When you first entered the place, you were enthralled with the store's shelved walls covered with dildos and vibrators in all shapes and sizes, books about all aspects of sexuality, plus erotica and porn DVDs, and so on. And you were like a kid in a candy store! (Except that in reality, you were an adult in a sex toy store. Which is very different.) You so badly wanted to try out *all the things*. But of course, as a young person who only recently (and rather hastily) moved to this high-cost-of-living city, you were pretty much broke. So you were perpetually in the process of saving up to buy new toys and new books, although not the porn—not because you are philosophically opposed to pornography, but rather because you are simply not a very visual person.

Anyway, Lady Parts used to be this magical place full of endless exploration. But over time, you slowly but surely absorbed all the information and tried out many of the toys. You began to figure out what reliably works for you and what does not. And eventually you realized that, vibrator-wise, all you really ever need is your Hitachi Magic Wand, plus a small egg for when you travel. And you and your partner have already found the dildos and strap-on harnesses that work best for you. And between the two of you, you now have a pleasure chest full of sex toys and accessories that you both accumulated over years of sexual exploration and previous relationships. But you never really use most of these toys anymore because, frankly, they just are not as good as your favorites. It's the sex toy equivalent of when you discover a wonderful new restaurant, and each time you go there you excitedly try a new dish, until eventually you settle on the one or two favorite dishes that you wind up getting all the time, despite the fact that they have an entire menu full of other stuff.

Sometimes you and your partner talk about getting rid of all the toys you don't use, but you never do, because it's not like you

can just drop them off at Goodwill. No, you have to boil them all, then call up all your sex-positive friends and actively try to find new homes them, as if they were pets that you are no longer able to care for. Such as real-life bunny rabbits.

So nowadays, as a sexually experienced woman, when I go to Lady Parts, I do not feel at all like a kid in a candy store. I feel more like an adult doing her grocery shopping. I have a mental list of the few staples that I regularly procure: that specific brand of condoms or dental dams, my preferred lube, and on rare occasions, a new Magic Wand when my current one is starting to sound like a dying car engine. Which is even more distracting than those pulse vibrators.

But on this particular day, there is only one thing on my shopping list: Eric #3. And maybe that sounds sort of creepy, like I am objectifying this guy because of his name. But I have found that most men tend not to mind it too much if you objectify them. Probably because they are not objectified on a regular basis, so it comes across as more unexpected than disturbing to them.

Upon walking into the store, I approach Eric #3 and he smiles. We exchange hugs and hellos. He asks about Matilda, and I say she's fine. Then I ask about David, and Eric says he's fine too. Eric then asks me if I am going to the reading tomorrow—which is how I know Eric #3, from the local literary scene. I say maybe. Then he asks, "So what brings you to the store today? Is there anything I can help you with?"

Me: You can help me by going out on a date with me.

Eric: Seriously?

Me: Seriously.

Eric: Sorry, I'm just a bit taken aback. I mean, you know I'm gay. Plus people almost always read me as gay, so I usually don't get asked out by women.

Me: Actually, most straight men don't get asked out by women either.

Eric: Well, I'm flattered. But can't you see how me being exclusively attracted to men might represent an impediment to us dating?

Me: Not dating plural. Just one date. For literature's sake.

I went on to tell him about my *99 Eric's* project, and to stress that all we would have to do is "assess one another's suitability" (without actually having to do anything physical) in order for us to formally call it a date. I also mentioned that it would be my treat. He agreed, and we decided to meet up for a couple drinks after his shift.

After seating ourselves at the bar, Eric #3 glanced around the fairly crowded room and remarked: I thought this was a queer bar?

Me: It is.

Eric: Then what are all these straight people doing here?

Me: Well, a lot of the techies and newbies who've moved into this neighborhood in recent years didn't know that it was a queer bar. Or didn't care. So now they hang out here too.

Eric: Why doesn't someone just kick them out?

Me: On what basis? Because they *look* straight? I mean, as a woman and man sharing a drink together, we probably strike some people as a straight couple. What's to stop them from kicking us out?

Eric: Well, you look straight-ish enough, but I seriously doubt that anyone would ever read me as straight.

Me: Oh yes, of course, because you are *so much more queer than me!* [I said extremely sarcastically, even though, as a writer, I know that it's considered poor form to use adverbs to describe dialogue.] Anyway, nowadays it's against the law to kick someone out of your establishment because of their sexual orientation. And heterosexuality just so happens to be a sexual orientation.

Eric: Great, so they are taking over our bars and our laws.

Me: Funny thing is, this was never a problem ten or fifteen

years ago, because most straight folks wouldn't be caught dead anywhere near a queer bar. But nowadays, they are no longer afraid of us, I fear. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if they thought that hanging out at a queer bar gives them some hipster cred.

Eric: Fucking hipsters . . . [he muttered, as he took a sip of his whiskey sour.]

Me: You know, for a long time, I thought that I hated hipsters too. But then one day, I was at a bar, writing in my journal and nursing my IPA, when these two guys sat down next to me. And they struck me as hipsters due to their vintage clothing and beards of notable length. And I couldn't help but overhear what they were saying—not because they were especially loud, but because as a writer, most of my best material comes from listening in on random people's conversations. And I heard one of them say to the other, "God, this place is crawling with hipsters." And I began to wonder who they were talking about. Was it the guy at the bar with the thick-framed glasses who was staring into his mobile device? Or the woman with all the piercings and dyed-purple punk haircut? Or the table of twenty-somethings who brought board games with them to play at the bar? Or maybe—just maybe—I was one of the hipsters they were talking about! I mean, I don't think that I look particularly hipster-ish. But perhaps these guys assume that people who write in their journals in dark bars whilst drinking pints of good beer are hipsters? Or maybe it's my liberal use of the word "whilst" that qualifies me as a hipster in their eyes?

And the more that I considered it, the more that I became convinced that "hipster" is merely a contemporary manifestation of what philosophers call the constitutive Other. Whenever we come across people who seem superficially different from us with regards to fashion sense, or taste in food or art, we reflexively label them "hipsters" as part of an ongoing social identity formation process, one that allows us to establish our own identities as unique and authentic individuals in contrast to this inauthentic

hipster Other.

Eric: Could be . . . [he said as he stroked his handlebar moustache.] Or maybe it's just that you are a hipster who doesn't understand what the word hipster means?

Me: Actually, that would be perfect, because now everyone in the bar will likely view us as not just a straight couple, but a straight hipster couple!

I raised my beer for a toast, but Eric #3 didn't reciprocate. Instead, he countered with a disgruntled smirk.

Just like a hipster, I thought.

4. Bomb

Okay, so now I feel like there is this bomb just sitting here in the pages of this book. Because in the last chapter, I casually introduced the fact that I am queer, mentioned my partner Matilda, and alluded (albeit via second-person point of view) to us sharing a large assortment of infrequently used sex toys. And let's be honest, this shouldn't really be a bomb; it should just be a small info drop—like in Chapter 2, when I briefly mentioned dropping out of grad school. Your reaction should be, “Okay, now we have learned a little bit more about this protagonist who we are only now just starting to get to know.”

In a perfect world, the whole thing would be just that: a small info drop. But we don't live in that world. Rather, we live in one with a long history of unscrupulous writers who purposefully treat their character's sexual minority status as though it were a time bomb that they set to detonate well into the story for maximum effect. “Oh my god, it turns out he's gay!” “Holy cow, she used to be a man!” “Criminy, this changes everything!”

But here's the thing: We all know that people who are gay, or transgender, or kinky, or sex workers, and so on, exist. In fact, if you sit down and actually do the math (as I have, because I *love* math!), each of these groups is more prevalent in the U.S. population than plumbers, stamp collectors, or people from Wyoming. Not to mention people who drop out of graduate-level linguistics programs. But if I were to mention that a character in this book falls into one of these latter categories, you probably wouldn't

blink an eye. At the very most, you might be mildly surprised. But you certainly wouldn't consider it to be a "plot twist."

If, over the course of this book, I ever reveal to you that one of the characters is a time traveler, or has superpowers, or is a cloned version of another human being, then by all means, feel free to be surprised, as none of these things are known to exist in real life. If I mention that one of the Erics used to be six-foot-five, but has since become five-foot-three, you will have every right to be shocked, as dramatic shrinking is not a part of the human experience. But sexual minorities are. We are part of the fabric of life, which, if you were to touch it, would probably feel like velour, or perhaps corduroy.

Anyway, unscrupulous writers craft time bombs out of their characters' sexual histories and proclivities. But not me. I am a one-woman bomb squad! And I am here to defuse these assumptions-in-the-form-of-time-bombs one by one. So here we go:

Assumption #1: Oh, you're a lesbian. But then why are you dating all these men named Eric?

Okay, see, there is this word called "bisexual." And it's a fairly common word, one that almost everyone knows. Your next-door neighbor knows it. Your grandmother knows it. Your teenaged nieces and nephews know it. And so on. But unfortunately, despite knowing the word, many people tend to be really bad at applying this knowledge to actual real-life situations. For instance, in response to me describing myself as bisexual, some straight people will say, "No, I think you must really be a lesbian who's too afraid to fully own it"—as if their heterosexuality somehow gives them piercing insight into the lesbian experience. And some gay people will say, "No, you're merely a heterosexual who is sexually experimenting"—despite the obvious fact that they live in a you're-not-gay-it's-just-a-phase glass house themselves, and they really shouldn't be throwing stones.

So to be clear, I am bisexual: I don't limit my dating pool to

members of a single gender. And you don't have to relate to or understand that experience in order to accept that fact. Personally, I don't understand why anyone would become a plumber, or stamp collector, or Wyomingite (yes, that's what they're called, I looked it up), but I will never doubt these people's existences, nor do their proclivities drive me into a frenzy of consternation.

Assumption #2: But wait, if Matilda is your partner, then you must be cheating on her. With Eric's, no less!

So Matilda and I are ethically non-monogamous. Or polyamorous, if you prefer that term. Which can mean different things to different people. But in our case, it means that we are primary partners, but we can also be romantic or sexual with other people within certain parameters that we have established together.

Being ethically non-monogamous suits us, in part, because we both have aspects of our sexuality that we cannot readily explore with one another. Being bisexual, I sometimes enjoy dating and fooling around with men. And while I can be somewhat kinky at times, Matilda is into more hardcore BDSM and role-play, which is not my thing. Like, for me personally, sexual arousal and pain exist at opposite ends of the enjoy/not-enjoy experiential continuum. And role-playing doesn't work for me because I am not a good actor—I can only play the part of Kat Cataclysm. On top of that, I like making jokes during sex, which isn't conducive to creating a supposedly serious scene.

Assumption #3: But Matilda must be dismayed by the prospect of you dating all these Eric's!

Actually, she is somewhat amused by it. She thinks it's weird, but then again, she likes the fact that I am weird. She finds it endearing. Probably because she's weird too.

To be honest, Matilda is far more concerned about the fact that I am a writer than she is about the fact that I am dating a plethora of Eric's. She worries that I will mine all of our most precious moments together and/or all the sordid and not-so-glamorous

parts of our relationship, and like, fashion stories out of them. As writers often do. So she made me promise not to write in depth about our relationship. Which is why you will never stumble upon a book called *1 Matilda*. At least not written by me.

I should also mention that Matilda isn't even her real name. She won't let me use her real name because she is a Democratic operative—seriously, that's what people who work for the Democratic party call themselves—"operatives"—as if they were fucking spies or some shit. And all her coworkers, who fancy themselves as open-minded liberals, and who often pat themselves on the back for being so accepting of gay people such as Matilda, would hypocritically freak out if they were to learn that she was in an ethically non-monogamous relationship with a bisexual woman who dates lots of Erics. Not to mention all the BDSM and role-playing on her part.

Assumption #4: I heard that bisexuals are really promiscuous and unable to commit to relationships, so it makes sense that you are polyamorous and seeking out lots of men named Eric.

Fuck you. And fuck your stereotype trap.

What is a "stereotype trap," you ask? Well, it's a logical fallacy that goes something like this:

- A) Negative stereotype exists about minority group X.
- B) Minority person Y seems to fit that stereotype.
- C) Therefore, the stereotype about group X must be true.

(Alternately, if you're an "upstanding" member of group X, then you might accuse person Y of "reinforcing" those stereotypes, thereby holding back the entire group.)

Here's the thing though: Everybody is different. And even within relatively small minority groups, people will fall all over the map, and have all sorts of different personalities. That's why I call it a stereotype trap: because some members of the group will inevitably resemble the stereotype. But that doesn't make the stereotype true.

So when confronted by peddlers of stereotypes, rather than engage them in the pointless this-stereotype-is-true-versus-false game, the most effective and emotionally rewarding response is to simply say “fuck you.”

Which is why I said “fuck you” just a moment ago. In response to those stereotypes.

Okay, I am done holding your hand and walking you through all this now.

5. Patronizing

Sorry if I came on a bit strong last chapter. And I know that as soon as I say that, some people will immediately rush to my defense and assure me that it's totally valid for me to express my anger and frustration as an oppressed polyamorous bisexual person, and that it's not my job to placate people in the monogamous monosexual majority. In theory, I totally get this. But at the same time, it's not really my personality to confront other people. Remember: I am the same Kat Cataclysm who failed at being a novelist because I am the queen of conflict avoidance (plus all those other reasons). And as a writer, I know how crucial it is to not have your characters do anything out of character. Such as having your character confront her readers about assumptions they may or may not be making about her, when her modus operandi is avoiding conflict. Especially when that character is you! (By which I mean me.)

Also, while I don't like it when people make incorrect assumptions about me, I have to admit that I often make incorrect assumptions about other people. Much to their chagrin. For instance, the first time that I heard someone say, "There's more than one way to skin a cat," I assumed this person knew this to be true from their own hands-on experiences flaying felines. And for a long time, I presumed that people who listen to techno music were only doing it in order to purposefully annoy me. Because *why on earth would you listen to techno music?!* But then Eric #3 told me that he really (and somewhat stereotypically) enjoys techno music. So I have since stopped making these assumptions about people.

So I guess the sad truth is that incorrect assumptions are going to happen from time to time. The important thing is to own them when they happen: “Oops, my bad, I have made a proverbial ass-out-of-you-and-me, my sincerest apologies.” And the worst thing you can do in such situations is to refuse to believe the person when they tell you that your initial assumption is wrong. Because then you’re just being patronizing. And not in a good way—you know, when you are patronizing a person’s establishment, thereby helping them earn a living. But rather, patronizing in a bad way: speaking down to them in a condescending manner, as if you know better than they do.

Some men speak down to women in a patronizing manner, so I can tell you firsthand how annoying this is. Like, I’ll meet some guy at a party and he’ll ask me what I do for a living. And I’ll tell him that I am an absurdist short fiction writer turned faux novelist who’s writing a book called *99 Eric*s about the writing process behind writing the faux novel *99 Eric*s, although I am not really making any kind of living doing this. But then, rather than ask me about or express interest in my project, this guy will just lecture me about some article he recently read in *Harper’s Magazine* about thirteenth-century absurdist short fiction, or some NPR story he heard about the collapse of the traditional publishing industry, or how he recently read *The Complete Book of Baby Names* and learned that Eric is derived from the old Norse name *Erikr*, which translates to “forever ruler.”

And of course I know all these things! Intimately! Far more than this guy does! But even when I share this knowledge with him—for instance, by listing old Norse “forever rulers” such as Erik the Red, Leif Erikson, and Eric the vampire from that old HBO show *True Blood*, who was like 1,000 years old, which isn’t forever, but it’s *pretty darn close*—this guy will still act like he knows more about these things than me. It’s so patronizing! And definitely not in a good way.

But then last summer, I was on a day trip to Stinson Beach with my friend Gabriella and her family, and her daughter asked me a simple question about whether it was high tide or not. But rather than answer her question, I went into a big spiel about how the tides are caused by the moon orbiting the earth. And when tides are high, it's because the moon's gravitational pull is literally lifting the water upward toward it. And after telling her all this, she gave me a frustrated look and said, "I know, I learned all about that last year in school."

Then it hit me: Oh my god, what I just did was so patronizing! And I don't want to be a patron. Not in a bad way.

Since then, I've tried to really commit myself to not speaking in a patronizing manner to anyone. Which is difficult to do. But after considering the problem at great length, I think I found a helpful solution: Rather than assume that your knowledge and expertise are superior to that of other people you encounter, instead try treating them as your equals. In other words, speak to them as though they already know everything that you know.

And just as I was refining my how-not-to-be-patronizing skill set, I went on a date with Eric #5, who I met through the usual personal ad channels. We had very little in common, which often happens when your one and only dating criterion is having been given the given name Eric. But we both liked baseball, so we went to a local sports bar to watch the Bay Bridge series: the Oakland A's versus the San Francisco Giants. Turns out, Eric #5 is one of those guys who gets all of his baseball information from those AM radio sports shows, where the host is this loudmouth who constantly barks and rants about everything. Whereas I get my baseball information from websites like *Fangraphs* and *Baseball Prospectus*, where they use advanced statistical analyses to garner insight into the game and its plethora of players.

So when Eric #5 started boasting about the defensive acumen of the Giants' rookie infielder, I (for obvious reasons) responded,

“Actually, he is rated as one of the worst defenders this season according to both UZR and DRS. Although, as we both know, defensive statistics typically take more than one season to stabilize.” And when Eric #5 mentioned that another Giants player was having a career year at the plate, I (for obvious reasons) countered: “The guy’s BABIP is a whopping .457, so his batting average is bound to regress in a big way. And given his poor plate discipline, I doubt he’ll end the year with an OBP over .300. So I am not particularly impressed.”

Suddenly, Eric #5 stood up and said, “Aren’t you the little miss brainy pants with all of your numbers, and showing off how much smarter you are than me. How fucking patronizing!” Then he swigged back the last sip of his beer and stomped out of the sports bar.

I just sat there in shock. Not because Eric walked out on me. But because it never occurred to me that one can be patronizing by both assuming that you are smarter than someone else, as well as by assuming that they know as much as you do.

Not to mention the fact that the word “patronizing” can be both a good and bad thing.

It’s like, *what the hell are you “patronizing”?* *Make up your fucking mind!*

6. Benevolent Dictator

I met Eric #7 at a Noam Chomsky college lecture. It was one of those special annual talks named after some guy who used to be an esteemed professor at this particular university, but then the professor died, so his former colleagues established this posthumous eponymous lecture series to commemorate him. And they really try to make it a hoity-toity affair—they even host a reception afterward, with wine and cheese and shit. And it all seems somewhat fancy at first, until you consider that they are serving the wine in plastic cups, and then you notice the wine label and it's "two-buck Chuck," which was admittedly a catchy gimmick until Trader Joe's raised the price to \$2.50 per bottle. But hey, it's all free, and I am a writer who is barely making ends meet, so of course I queue up in line for some food and wine.

And I'm sure that some people actually think of this process as "waiting in line"—you know, you're just biding your time in a linear fashion until you eventually get the stuff you want. But I prefer to think of this process as "becoming a sitting duck." Because if you are a relatively youngish woman who is by herself in a public space, and especially if you are waiting to be served some sort of alcohol, some men will take this as a sign that you must be absolutely dying to have a conversation with them.

So I was not at all surprised when the guy standing behind me said, "Great talk, huh?"

"I suppose . . ." I didn't even look at him when I said it. And I assumed that he would assume that I presume that I am too good

for him. Many men seem to come to this conclusion when women rebuff their advances. But in actuality, I just had things on my mind—specifically, the whole confusing matter regarding the word “patronizing,” which *no, I’m still not over yet!*—and I just didn’t want to be bothered right then. It’s as simple as that.

But some guys are persistent. And I totally blame Hollywood for this. Because many movies have some sort of male lead who is super-forward and relentless in pursuing the female love interest. And she is resistant at first, but over time he woos her—whatever the fuck “woo” means. Somehow, she goes from contemplating filing a restraining order to eventually falling in love with this guy over the course of like, ninety minutes. And teenage boys, who tend to think of girls as some sort of mystery—even though we are like *half the fucking people on earth*—will watch these films and conclude that girls must want them to be really aggressive and to not take “no” for an answer. And that, in a nutshell, is rape culture.

Anyway, the guy in line behind me was not easily deterred. “Hi, my name is Eric.”

And he had me at Eric.