

History's Rejected Princesses: A Conversation with Jason Portath

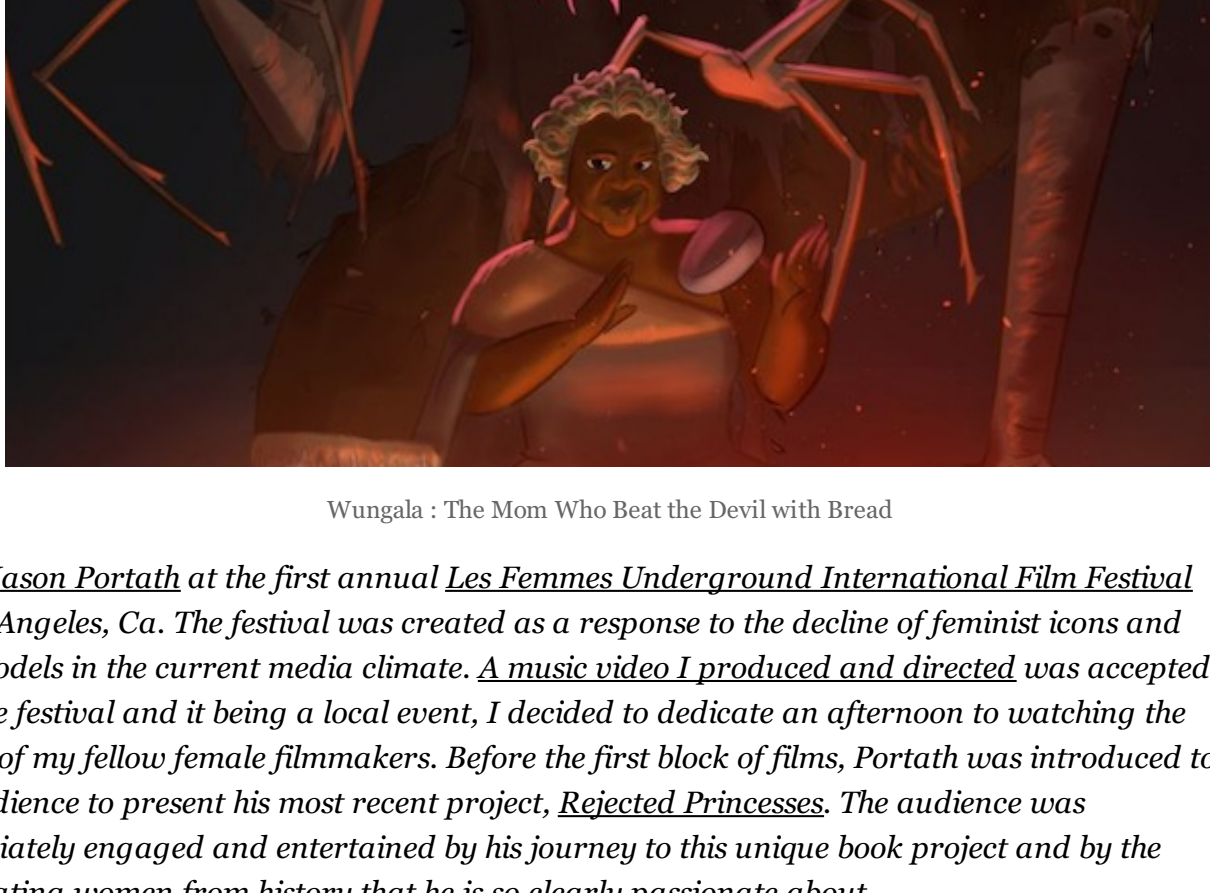
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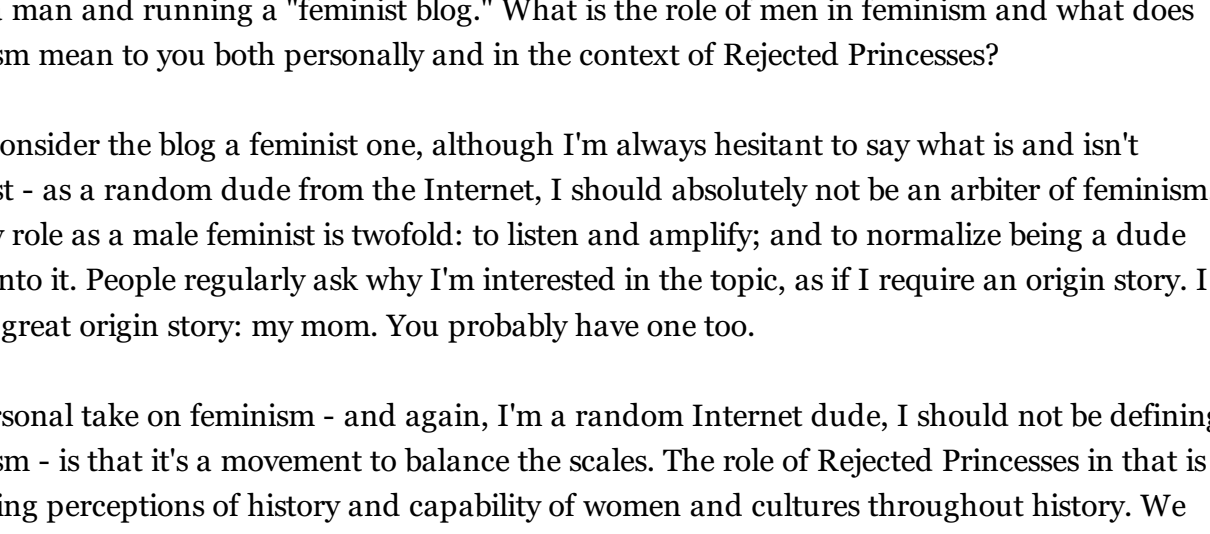


Wungala : The Mom Who Beat the Devil with Bread

I met [Jason Portath](#) at the first annual [Les Femmes Underground International Film Festival](#) in Los Angeles, Ca. The festival was created as a response to the decline of feminist icons and role models in the current media climate. [A music video I produced and directed](#) was accepted into the festival and it being a local event, I decided to dedicate an afternoon to watching the works of my fellow female filmmakers. Before the first block of films, Portath was introduced to the audience to present his most recent project, [Rejected Princesses](#). The audience was immediately engaged and entertained by his journey to this unique book project and by the captivating women from history that he is so clearly passionate about.

Leila Jarman (LJ): Tell us a little bit about yourself and how Rejected Princesses came about.

Jason Portath (JP): I'm a cisgender straight white dude from Kentucky who is about the least likely candidate for doing this project. Rejected Princesses spun out of a conversation I had with colleagues at [DreamWorks Animation](#) (where I worked for many years) shortly after Frozen came out. A bad clickbait article was going around about how the Frozen girls were bad role models. We challenged each other to come up with way worse candidates for animated princess movies, and some of the ideas were so horrible I had to see them exist in some form - like Nabokov's Lolita. But a lot of the suggestions I tossed out, like warrior queens Boudica and Nzinga Mbande, nobody had heard of. I thought that was a shame, so I put together some illustrations for kicks. At the time, I had no background in illustration - I was a very technical sort of animator, more like a programmer in some ways. But it went viral, and I've been working on it ever since. Thankfully, my art has gotten a little better since then.

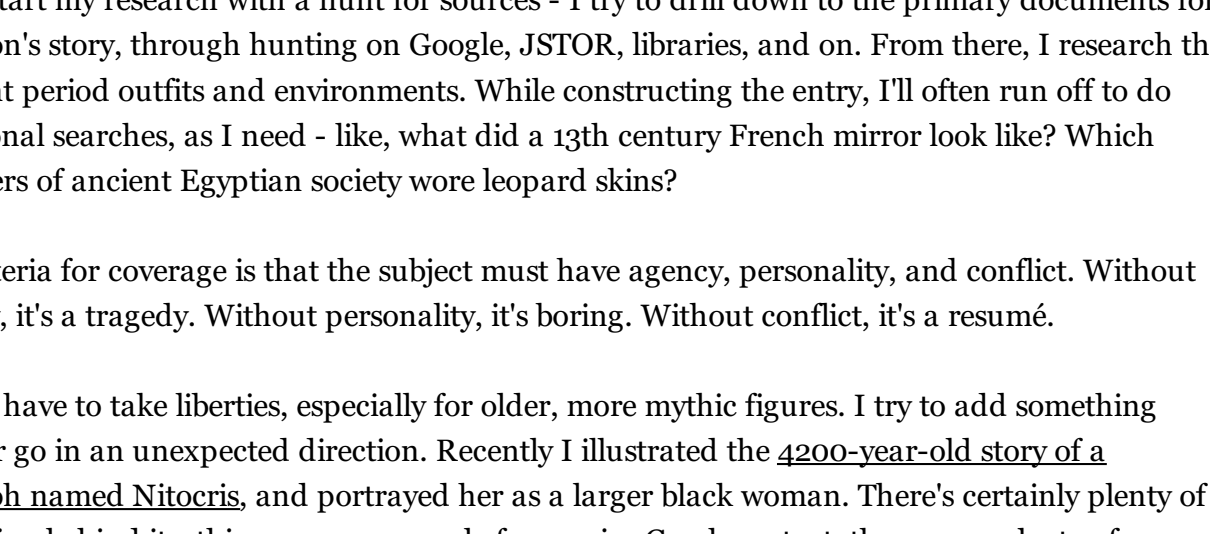


Taytu Betul: The Bad Cop Empress of Ethiopia

LJ: After doing some research and reading other interviews online, every interviewer asks about being a man and running a "feminist blog." What is the role of men in feminism and what does feminism mean to you both personally and in the context of Rejected Princesses?

JP: I consider the blog a feminist one, although I'm always hesitant to say what is and isn't feminist - as a random dude from the Internet, I should absolutely not be an arbiter of feminism. But my role as a male feminist is twofold: to listen and amplify; and to normalize being a dude who's into it. People regularly ask why I'm interested in the topic, as if I require an origin story. I have a great origin story: my mom. You probably have one too.

My personal take on feminism - and again, I'm a random Internet dude, I should not be defining feminism - is that it's a movement to balance the scales. The role of Rejected Princesses in that is balancing perceptions of history and capability of women and cultures throughout history. We are all descendants of a line of brave, fearless, genius women dating back to the dawn of mankind. A connection to that history is the birthright of every person. But that history has been systematically withheld. Rejected Princesses is trying to re-establish that link in some small way.



Isabella of France: The She-Wolf of France

LJ: What about these women from history has captivated you so completely?

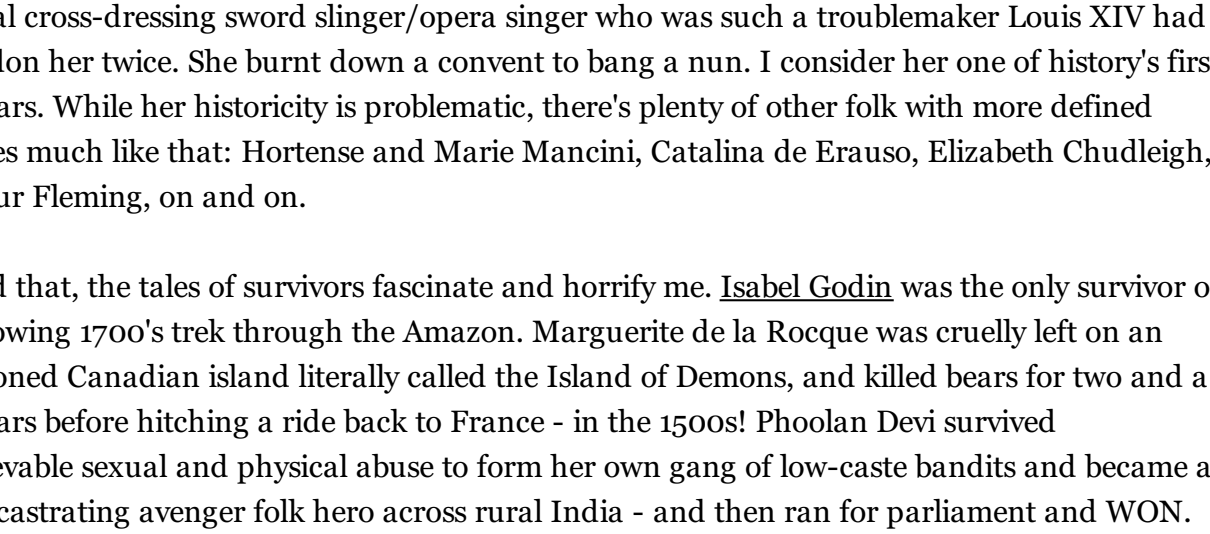
JP: They're phenomenal stories that almost nobody has heard. I can't imagine why you wouldn't be captivated by them.

LJ: What is your research process like? Do you conduct your research with gender/historical/writers bias in mind? Do you take liberties when you can't find information on clothing, skin color/the way a woman looked, etc?

JP: I start my research with a hunt for sources - I try to drill down to the primary documents for a person's story, through hunting on Google, JSTOR, libraries, and on. From there, I research the relevant period outfits and environments. While constructing the entry, I'll often run off to do additional searches, as I need - like, what did a 13th century French mirror look like? Which members of ancient Egyptian society wore leopard skins?

My criteria for coverage is that the subject must have agency, personality, and conflict. Without agency, it's a tragedy. Without personality, it's boring. Without conflict, it's a resumé.

I often have to take liberties, especially for older, more mythic figures. I try to add something new, or go in an unexpected direction. Recently I illustrated the [4200-year-old story of a pharaoh named Nitocris](#), and portrayed her as a larger black woman. There's certainly plenty of reasoning behind it - this was 1500 years before major Greek contact, there were plenty of Nubian Egyptians, on and on - but fundamentally, it was an artistic choice. Someone hopped on me immediately, critiquing the skin tone, facial structure, cheekbone placement, nose shape, on and on... on a cartoon depiction of a woman who likely never actually existed. It started a lively discussion which informed a number of readers on the debates over this - although the originating critic was certainly not one of those newly informed - but I still consider that mission accomplished.



Lyudmila Pavlichenko : The Deadliest Female Sniper in History

LJ: You categorize your rejects as either awesome, awful or offbeat. Are these objective, historical perspectives that you've collated of these women, or is it about how you subjectively view and categorize them?

JP: Moralizing historical women is a trap. Think about it: the list of women in history books is safe, censored, and short. That's by design. The instant you start picking at people's flaws, you whittle away the edges that made them human, until only a small handful, like Helen Keller, Amelia Earhart, and Harriet Tubman pass the "purity test" and make it in. But even those choices are censored: Helen Keller was an outspoken socialist. Amelia Earhart was a polyamorous libertine. Harriet Tubman burnt down plantations and knocked out her own front teeth with the butt of a revolver when she got a tooth infection. It does everyone a disservice to categorize them so.

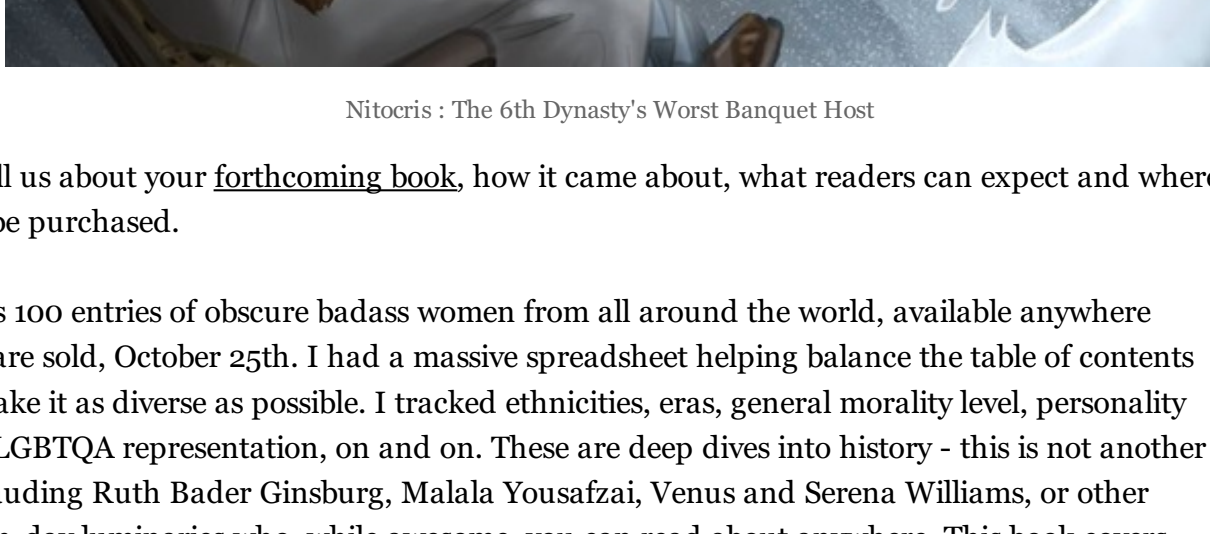
Nevertheless, I do provide rudimentary categorization for parents to help choose what to show their children, according to how I think most people would conventionally view these women. I do label them as Heroic, Villainous, or Mixed -- although most everyone I cover falls into Mixed. I believe in not censoring your content, but I also believe in labeling what's in it.

LJ: Which type of story (awesome, awful, or offbeat) are you most drawn to or excited when you come across? Who are your favorite awesome, awful, and offbeat and why?

JP: I have a deep-seated love of historical rascals - the sort of libertines who just shrugged off society's rules and did whatever they wanted to do. The best example of this is [Julie d'Aubigny](#), a bisexual cross-dressing sword slinger/opera singer who was such a troublemaker Louis XIV had to pardon her twice. She burnt down a convent to bang a nun. I consider her one of history's first rock stars. While her historicity is problematic, there's plenty of other folk with more defined histories much like that: Hortense and Marie Mancini, Catalina de Erauso, Elizabeth Chudleigh, Seymour Fleming, on and on.

Beyond that, the tales of survivors fascinate and horrify me. [Isabel Godin](#) was the only survivor of a harrowing 1700's trek through the Amazon. Marguerite de la Rocque was cruelly left on an abandoned Canadian island literally called the Island of Demons, and killed bears for two and a half years before hitching a ride back to France - in the 1500s! Phoolan Devi survived unbelievable sexual and physical abuse to form her own gang of low-caste bandits and became a rapist-castrating avenger folk hero across rural India - and then ran for parliament and WON. In 1996!

I don't know. All of that is just so incredible to me. I can't understand how anyone wouldn't be bowled over by that.



Gouyen: Wise Woman of the Apache

LJ: When I saw you speak at the film festival, I remember you talking about the sanitization of content for girls. Like, why do we all know about Genghis Khan but not about [Jeanne de Clisson](#)?

JP: History classes are given less credit. You have to cram all of human history into a very small chunk of time, and the goal is to pass tests. That's also why most people find history so boring - there's almost no time to cover specific people. But when you do, history comes alive. I mean hell, Hamilton made federal debt debates compelling! It's a lot easier to understand and care about history when you put that human component back in, and outside of a small handful of figures like Genghis Khan, there's rarely time to do so.

LJ: What do you think is the reason for Hollywood, DreamWorks, Disney (etc, etc) not investing in stories like those of the rejected princesses that you feature? Do you think there's a growing demand for a more varied history of women?

JP: They've tried. People don't go see them. Who saw Princess Mononoke in theaters? Coraline? Monsters vs Aliens (which was literally a female empowerment movie)? It is a very difficult thing to aim at where you think the culture is heading in five years. Fire, and know that if you don't hit, everyone you work with, and their their families, are all going to be out of work. That is an unbelievably difficult thing to ask of anyone. I've been at companies when films misfire and they have to fire people. It's like going to a funeral every day for years.

Nobody remembers that DreamWorks tried to rock the boat when it first started. Its first movie was a historical epic entirely populated by brown-skinned people where the climax involved the death of every firstborn child in Egypt. They then went on to make a Woody Allen movie for kids and a movie where the main character barely talked - 10 years before Wall-E. None of those worked, and from what I understand, the studio was almost ready to shut down when Shrek hit. Since then, most of the movies have been variations on Shrek. There's an institutional memory of being in the bunker with a gun in their hand. And I understand why. It's a tough problem.



Nitocris : The 6th Dynasty's Worst Banquet Host

LJ: Tell us about your [forthcoming book](#), how it came about, what readers can expect and where it can be purchased.

JP: It's 100 entries of obscure badass women from all around the world, available anywhere books are sold, October 25th. I had a massive spreadsheet helping balance the table of contents and make it as diverse as possible. I tracked ethnicities, eras, general morality level, personality types, LGBTQ+ representation, on and on. These are deep dives into history - this is not another book lauding Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Malala Yousafzai, Venus and Serena Williams, or other modern-day luminaries who, while awesome, you can read about anywhere. This book covers French divorce pioneers of the renaissance; larger-than-life Hawaiian queens; native Canary Island judges; leaders of Jamaican runaway slave societies; sword-slinging heroines of long Arabian epics; widowed Indian queens who led armed rebellion against the English; and the black, griffin-riding amazon queen for whom California was named (no, really).

LJ: I look forward to picking up a copy! Finally, why do you do this work and what is the future of Rejected Princesses?

JP: I do it because it's important. It feeds my soul. I'd love to take on collaborators for Rejected Princesses, and move into video. Working on it.

Jason Porath worked on animated movies such as How to Train Your Dragon 2, The Croods, and Kung Fu Panda 2. Upon leaving the animation industry, he started Rejected Princesses: a blog celebrating women of history and myth who were too awesome, awful, or offbeat for the animated princess treatment. It went viral, there's a book, and the rest is history. He currently lives in Los Angeles and enjoys exploring abandoned buildings and singing a lot of karaoke.

Leila Jarman holds a BA in Political Science and Middle Eastern Studies from Marymount Manhattan College and is a Los Angeles-based filmmaker and video artist. Since 2009, she has produced and directed documentary feature films, narrative, and experimental short films and music videos that have been screened at film festivals and in galleries around the world including the TATE Britain, Ars Electronica, the Dubai International Film Festival and others. Her work has been featured on prominent online media sites such as VICE and The Creator's Project. As Program Director for Women's Voices Now, Leila acts as a filmmaker-in-residence, heading WVN's fiscal sponsorship program providing mentorship and professional guidance for local and international filmmakers as well as curating and organizing film screenings and advocacy events in Los Angeles and abroad. Voice of the Valley, her 2009 documentary directorial debut, followed the professional career of two self-made Muslim women journalists and their struggle to overcome social and cultural barriers to produce the most important social, political, and economic radio program in Jordan.

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