

INTERSECTIONS RADIO

JONATHAN SUN

TRANSCRIPT

SARIKA MEHTA: You are listening to Intersections Radio, the podcast where we geek out on all things intersectionality. I'm your host, Sarika Mehta. Welcome, and thanks for tuning in.

Today, my guest is Jonathan Sun, who is pursuing a PhD in Urban Studies from MIT. But you may be more familiar with him as a Twitter phenomenon, with an alien character named Jonny Sun. He's also the author of *Everyone's a Alien When You're A Alien Too*. Or as it's written with creative spelling, "Everyone's a Aliebn When Ur a Aliebn Too." This is a delightful tale of Jonny Sun's adventures as he is sent to earth to study humans, and mostly falls short of this goal, and finds himself, or itself, meeting all non-human creatures on earth.

This book explores many emotions and experiences, such as solitude and insecurity, but also utter joy. Jonathan Sun joined me in studio just before the recent solar eclipse. Jonathan, welcome.

JONATHAN SUN: Thank you, thank you for having me.

SARIKA MEHTA: Let's start by talking a little bit about yourself, growing up in Toronto, and how the character Jonny Sun came to be.

JONATHAN SUN: Oh, sure, I mean, Jonny Sun is essentially my identity online. It's kind of funny, because I don't really think of it as -- in terms of like a character, it kind of has just become like the identity of myself that I've ported onto Twitter. Which is kind of cool, and it -- the idea of like seeing the world as an outsider, and kind of like seeing it through, like, a sort of alien perspective, is something that comes naturally to me as I guess an outsider in general. And --

SARIKA MEHTA: How are you an outsider?

JONATHAN SUN: I've sort of always grown up to be a little bit on the outskirts, a little bit, of, an introvert, and like, someone who kind of stands in the corners and likes to observe, which is basically how I feel like I've lived my entire life. But, the genesis of like the Twitter account, and the perspective and that identity, really came when I moved to the US. As a Canadian living abroad, I guess.

And even though, like, Canada and the US are pretty similar, in most respects, there still is this strange, uncanny value when I got to the US, and I felt like, oh, this is -- this is a

different country, in, like, very intangible ways that I couldn't put my finger on, but, it made me kind of understand my own position and perspective as, like, as someone who was outside of this culture, I guess.

SARIKA MEHTA: When did you move here?

JONATHAN SUN: In 2012.

SARIKA MEHTA: Okeh. So, before the current administration.

JONATHAN SUN: Yeah, like, I got here in the best times, like, it was Obama's re-election year.

SARIKA MEHTA: Yeah.

JONATHAN SUN: Well, I will say, like, the biggest shock, when I first got here, was how, like, much politics was, like, part of the, just like the social conversation, and like the cultural focus. Because in Canada, we don't really, like, we talk about US politics more than we talk about Canadian politics, for better or for worse.

SARIKA MEHTA: Right.

JONATHAN SUN: And, there's just not that level of the political entertainment kind of complex --

SARIKA MEHTA: Interesting.

JONATHAN SUN: -- in Canadian culture. So getting here was insane, because we, I like got to the US in August, and people were going to movie theaters to watch the debates, and like everyone was, like, it was just this big cultural phenomenon.

SARIKA MEHTA: Yeah. That is really interesting, because it is a big part of our culture, it's something I didn't think about. I think also just being south Asian American, I mean, even in south Asia, politics are a huge part of the dinner table conversation.

JONATHAN SUN: Yeah.

SARIKA MEHTA: So, I guess I didn't ever think about it any other way, personally. So, just to fast forward a little bit.

JONATHAN SUN: Sure, yeah.

SARIKA MEHTA: You know, you moved here during the Obama administration, and then Canada gained Justin Trudeau.

JONATHAN SUN: Right. Yes.

SARIKA MEHTA: Which is, America's heartthrob or something. And, do you feel like that conversation has changed?

JONATHAN SUN: It's made me a lot more aware, I think, of what it's like in Toronto, and what it's like in Canada, every time I go back. Every time I do go home to visit, I'm, I kind of see -- see it with, I think, more objective eyes, like, when I -- I was, I grew up in Toronto, so like that was kind the only home I knew. And then every time I go back, I'm kind of like -- it feels like home, and it feels incredibly, I think, diverse, and very inclusive, and like accepting. And it's a great thing to go back and see, with kind of like renewed eyes.

SARIKA MEHTA: So, you said you grew up feeling like an outsider, and now you feel more of an acceptance there.

JONATHAN SUN: Yeah.

SARIKA MEHTA: Well, you also have background in sketch comedy, so talk about how that influenced this -- this twitter personality, let's put it that way.

JONATHAN SUN: Sure, yeah, and even before I started writing comedy on Twitter, I was part of this sketch comedy group in Toronto called School Night. We were actually based out of the engineering faculty department in the University of Toronto, so it was mainly a bunch of engineers doing comedy, which was already, like, the coolest thing ever, because there's just such, like, a strain, like, multidisciplinary approach, and the perspectives are very interesting.

But I was an engineer. I did my undergrad in engineering, and then was also doing comedy and writing plays, and like doing theater on the side. So that was kind of my way into comedy, and, like, realizing that I had a voice and that I loved to write, and I loved to kind of like create things out of nothing.

But once I moved away for school, for my masters, I wanted to keep that comedy sort of part of my brain going. And so I turned to Twitter, and I found this great community of people writing silly, surreal, strange jokes on Twitter, and I was like, I'm going to play here. I'm going to like use this as a way to continue to hone my voice, and my writing craft. And I've kind of stuck to it for the last four, five years, and eventually I feel like I've figured out the space I like carved out for myself.

SARIKA MEHTA: Yeah, I mean, social media is powerful that way, you know, it's -- I think it is a way, like you were saying, for maybe people who aren't so comfortable just putting themselves out there in the traditional publicity sense, which is ironic, because Twitter, you know, it's there, and it's there forever, and it reaches a much wider audience much quicker, so --

JONATHAN SUN: Right.

SARIKA MEHTA: From that perspective, talk about how that feels. Did it feel scary at first?

JONATHAN SUN: It never felt scary at all. It's because I think there are good pockets of Twitter, or like good little communities where it always just feels like you're in a writers room, and you're kind of like with friends sharing dumb jokes that you think of with each other, like, that's always the spirit that it's kind of embodied for me, and that's always like kind of the role it's played in my own practice of writing, I suppose.

So it's always been this fun place to play, and like, I kind of see it as a writer's sketchbook, or just like a place where you can test material, or don't, and like, you're right, and instant feedback is really interesting, because, as a writer you don't really get that many chances to test your writing out, for instance, sort of, an instant conversation, right?

Like, if you're a performer, if you're doing standup, then you get that feedback from the audience, but as a writer, having something you've written be read immediately, there aren't that many chances to really interface with that. So I think Twitter's like such a cool platform, and opportunity to do that specifically if you're working with like a text-based medium. You know?

SARIKA MEHTA: You mentioned it feels like a small writers room, but you have a huge number of followers, and, all walks of life have access to Twitter, so, maybe it's, from a woman's perspective, I always just have some hesitation, and a little bit of a fear of how, not so much the feedback, but some kind of a negative response that can --

JONATHAN SUN: Yeah.

SARIKA MEHTA: -- really have a terrible domino effect.

JONATHAN SUN: Absolutely. I think there's such a -- I mean, that's like the biggest conversation we need to be having more of, I think, just like around the topic of like abuse and harassment online, especially for women, especially for minorities, or like LGBTQIA members of that community, who, essentially by putting themselves online, they make themselves targets. Right? I've gotten a little bit of that, as an Asian Canadian, but I think I've protected myself a bit because I'm -- I tweet under, like, an avatar, so my, like, identity isn't front and center.

But I've still gotten some of it, but I've talked to so many of my like female comedian friends, and I've started to see like the types of abuse they get on a daily basis, and it's horrific. And it's totally terrible, so I completely understand that perspective, too, and it's just, it's unfortunately because the way we all talk about it is, like, this is something that

you have to accept and deal with if you're going to be in this space.

SARIKA MEHTA: Right, and the whole point is that you're thoughts should be respected, you know, that you should have the ability -- you should have the rights to having a voice.

JONATHAN SUN: Right. Yeah, and the way that the abuse and harassment happens online is just unacceptable, it's an unacceptable level.

SARIKA MEHTA: Absolutely.

JONATHAN SUN: Yeah.

SARIKA MEHTA: Well, let's shift gears to a happier topic --

JONATHAN SUN: Yes.

SARIKA MEHTA: -- which is your graphic novel, which, it's called "Everyone's a Aliebn When Ur a Aliebn Too." Maybe we'll start with the spelling. What's the deal with that?

JONATHAN SUN: Yeah, I mean, that was -- that was something that was part of something I was playing with online, and, when I was writing jokes for Twitter and for an audience, that was on social media and that was kind of familiar with the internet, because the internet, I think, has like this history of creating voice through typo and through grammatical error.

And when I started playing on Twitter, there was a group of all these different like accounts and writers who were messing with language in similar ways or in different ways than I was, and I saw it as a very, like, almost like I kind of saw it in reference to the Fluxus Movement from the '60s, there's this tradition of poets, too, who are constantly playing with form and language, and I saw that as those strange, alt-comedy, contemporary version of that, in a way.

So, I've always been interested in how you could create a specific voice, or how you could change the reading of something through like changing the aesthetic of it.

SARIKA MEHTA: It starts to diminish a little bit as the story goes on.

JONATHAN SUN: Uh huh.

SARIKA MEHTA: Is that because Jonny Sun is becoming more a part of the community on earth?

JONATHAN SUN: Yeah. I think that -- I mean, I'm really glad you noticed that because I did intentionally through the book, especially use typos and I think like syntax stuff to

that effect, to create a sense of disconnection and a sense of sort of alien-ness at the beginning, and then, you're right, as it goes on, it both diminishes a little bit but I think also the reader gets more used to it, and so you kind of skip over it --

SARIKA MEHTA: You stop seeing it.

JONATHAN SUN: -- a bit more, and so like both of those create that effect, of kind of being at first, the reader kind of being a bit like separate from that, that world, and that, the reading of it, and then as you go on, you sort of welcome them in, or the reader, at the same time, kind of like learns how to read that language.

SARIKA MEHTA: It felt like this was a character learning a new language, and tripping over the spelling or the characters of it, and then as Jonny Sun becomes more immersed in -- in earth, and becomes more fluent in the language of earth --

JONATHAN SUN: Yeah, that's right.

SARIKA MEHTA: -- something like, that's kind of how I had read it.

JONATHAN SUN: Yeah, that's absolutely right. I mean, my Twitter bio is "Alien confused about human language." And I think that carried through to the book in the sense that, I've always considered like human language not to be like -- like English or like a spoken language, but really just the ways that we interface with each other.

It's like an emotional kind of language instead, and so that narrative too has come in the book, where Jonny comes -- Jonny comes to the earth, almost as like a blank slate emotionally, and throughout the book learns about sadness, and learns about loneliness, and learns about all these complex human emotions. And then, by the end, leaves with a much more, like, fully formed understanding of what it means to be human.

SARIKA MEHTA: So there's a point where there's a nothingness that would feel sad and lonely if you are surrounded -- that one would feel sad in this nothingness. So then, nothingness says, okeh, I will leave. And then it's overwhelming chaos of everything, and that was -- yeah, that is kind of how it would be if we had no nothing, if we had everything.

JONATHAN SUN: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, like, part of so much of the book was written in -- in such immense solitude, and I think, like doing a book in general is a very lonely act, and so, that was my meditation on the actual making of the thing, as I was doing it, and that sort of thread of kind of accepting, like, the negative space, and accepting solitude and nothingness was -- was really me coming to terms with my own kind of isolation as I was working on the book, and how it's not a bad --

SARIKA MEHTA: It's necessary, actually.

JONATHAN SUN: Absolutely, yeah, and I learned so much about myself, and how I'm able to sort of deal with that, and accept that, and really, really treat it as like a welcome thing.

SARIKA MEHTA: The characters are creatures on earth that we might encounter: a tree, or a bee, a frog, and -- but then there's like a, there's a hedgehog who's having a crisis of confidence about being an artist.

JONATHAN SUN: I think like part of what I really wanted to do was sort of pay tribute to like the illustrated children's books that I like read growing up, and like the sort of Shel Silverstein, the Maurice Sendak, the type of like Roald Dahl, that sort of space of work, to me, a lot of that was sort of interfacing with like fables and animal characters, like the Winnie The Pooh type stories.

And so, I thought it was really great, and really fun, and really maybe a bit subversive to sort of take these sort of animal archetypes, or these character types, and try to tell new stories with them, or try to subvert like the audience expectation. One of my favorite characters to have written for for the book was an owl who understands the pressure of living up to like the wise owl kind of trope, right, or character type, and who feels immensely inadequate, and has like this deep impostor syndrome because owls are supposed to be wise, but the owl doesn't feel wise. And that character's storyline is dealing with impostor syndrome, and that feeling of inadequacy.

SARIKA MEHTA: The other side of the character Jonny Sun, or the personality, is the -- so this is an alien. Jonny Sun feels -- feels like an outsider even amongst his, or its, own tribe of aliens, and is sent to study humans on earth and he a little bit falls short of that goal.

JONATHAN SUN: Yeah, that's right.

SARIKA MEHTA: By finding all of -- all non-humans to try to understand human nature. But there was another scene, showing Jonny Sun sitting against a tree, and the text reads, "A friend is anyone or anything who shares a life with you that you would never be able to experience without them." And then, you know, later in the book, there's an appearance of a bouncy castle.

JONATHAN SUN: Yeah, I mean, my favorite types of stories are just of like, of tones, are things that I sort of oscillate between like a few, like, different extremes, between sort of like the deeply emotional and the deeply sort of profound, and then the very like loose and silly, and surreal, for me, like a goal for the book was to sort of meander and kind of go back and forth between those.

Like, my favorite types of comedies are the ones that you never know what to expect next. Like, you don't know if you're going to like veer into like a very serious area, or you're going to go wildly like surreal. I mean, I think like comedy's so powerful in that

way, because it becomes like a way to sort of Trojan Horse different ideas into a story, or into a narrative, and into like a discussion that, or a conversation you have with your readers.

So if you can sort of like get them on the same page laughing, then you can -- you give, they give you permission to like take them other places, and to take them deeper and to take them more honest and emotional.

SARIKA MEHTA: You were kind of a Twitter sensation before this book came out. Was this a collection of tweets that you were testing in the writers' room of Twitter, or did you have the graphic novel in mind before you set out with these ideas? How did it work?

JONATHAN SUN: That's a really good question. I think, I mean, I started writing on Twitter just as a place to have fun, and just to learn or teach myself how to like get better at telling jokes. The book, well, I'd always wanted to do a book, and I'd always wanted to, especially, like to do like this sort of graphic illustrated story type of book. And, at some point, I just remember going through my own Twitter account and the things that I had written, and finding like common threads and common topics that I, like, kept finding myself going back to.

Topics about, like, depression, and loneliness, and isolation, and also like creativity and art and impostor syndrome, and everything. But realizing that those were things that I constantly hit in like the last four years that I had been writing, I realized, like, oh, okeh, this might be like a starting point to some larger piece, or some stand-alone kind of larger narrative.

But the book itself is about a quarter, or maybe a third, existing stuff from Twitter. Most of it is new material.

SARIKA MEHTA: Okeh.

JONATHAN SUN: I worked really hard to make it just a new original narrative.

SARIKA MEHTA: And it's so far out -- I mean, all of this, this book, and your internship, all this is pretty far outside of what you're actually doing for your PhD.

JONATHAN SUN: Right, and it's slowly coming closer together, so, like I started my PhD looking really at cities, and I'm in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning, and I was looking at data-driven cities, and like big data, and how you can take that information and aggregate it to help the design of like future cities, or like help the restoration processes of current cities and things like that.

But, as I was sort of interrogating my role on Twitter, I've sort of shifted my focus now to looking at online communities, and understanding perhaps like social media as a new space where people gather and finding these, these translations or these metaphors of the

city that kind of occur on the internet, instead.

And part of that was looking at MIT. I set up a speaker series where I invited some of my friends from, like, the the Twitter comedy world to talk about how they saw their like place in online society, and like all those sorts of discussions. So I'm trying to bring it all closer together. I haven't figured it out yet, but I think that's -- that's my goal.

SARIKA MEHTA: How has MIT responded, or your department, or your faculty, responded to the fact that you have this whole Twitter personality, you have this published graphic novel, and you've had praise from, oh, for example, Lynn Manuel Miranda, Patton Oswalt, I mean, it's a little outside of --

JONATHAN SUN: Academia.

SARIKA MEHTA: -- academia, to say the least.

JONATHAN SUN: Right.

SARIKA MEHTA: Particularly MIT academia.

JONATHAN SUN: It's, that's actually a great question. I mean, the way, the reason I started doing the book was, I was in my, I'd just started the PhD program, I felt totally out of my element, was sort of confused about what I was doing there, and sort of just like really feeling that impostor syndrome. I felt like I was surrounded by all these people who, like, who kind of knew what they were doing, and I was a little bit lost, and I turned to a creative project, as I tend to do, to sort of cope with that and to sort of have like the one thing that I could have control over, the one thing I sort of knew how to do in my bones, was to write a story, and to produce something that I wanted -- that I had a vision for, you know.

So, for sure, that sort of split has always existed. I think what's been fun about having this position and being in academia is that there are some people who just, will not get it. Right? And I kind of am an anomaly in the department, because most people in the department are not looking at online spaces or the internet, they're looking at like policy, and land zoning, and a lot of legal issues, with the physical city.

And so I definitely am an anomaly in there, but there are enough people who do kind of get what I'm doing, and who sort of understand my perspective, or understand why I would want to combine these two things, that I have a few people on my side who are enough to like sort of support me and help me figure out, and help me like carve this new space, both within the department and just outside in the larger sort of MIT community.

To be frank, like, I think in academia, there is a significant amount of pushback, or just people confused about what I'm doing here, especially in like doctoral programs, which are very, like, specialty driven, right? But I think for me I've just had to learn how to

present myself, and talk about my work, in ways that make sense enough to different people and different academics, and sort of find my allies, and sort of find the fields that I actually map onto, like, even though I'm in the Department of Urban Studies, most of the courses and the people I've connected to are in like comparative media studies, or in like society and technology studies.

And I've been really lucky because I have gotten the chance to sort of find my own way into these spaces, and --

SARIKA MEHTA: I'm glad to hear that you didn't have to give up one or the other to make all of this happen.

JONATHAN SUN: Thank you. Yeah, I'm -- I hope that's true. I'm still figuring it out.

SARIKA MEHTA: We're going to hold you to it.

JONATHAN SUN: Yeah.

SARIKA MEHTA: I have a couple of last questions.

JONATHAN SUN: Sure.

SARIKA MEHTA: As somebody who is observing and studying human nature, or is sent here to study this, what would Jonny Sun say about recent events, or this political climate?

JONATHAN SUN: Right.

SARIKA MEHTA: And I'm thinking more about how you were saying that in Canada, when you were growing up, politics was not so embedded in just everyday conversation.

JONATHAN SUN: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I think a lot of the book is a direct -- like, the themes of the book deal with diversity, and the celebrate -- I mean, it's right in the title, like, it's a celebration of otherness. It's a celebration of the alien. And there is this, the, I think what's threaded and sort of in like what's sort of central to the DNA of the book is this idea that difference is what makes life interesting and worth living, and that's how you learn from people, and by being able to be in a world full of diverse people, and perspectives. That's what makes it worthwhile, and that's what's worth celebrating.

And so, definitely when I was working on the book, it was the 2016 election cycle, and a lot of that was weighing on my mind. Right? And, as much as I could, I wanted it to have that very strong message of celebrating outsiders, and welcoming people from other places into our lives, and celebrating the differences and valuing the different perspectives that they could bring to us.

I think looking -- thinking about like my upbringing in Canada, through that lens, was also really important because I kind of took stock of like all the friends that I valued and all like my deepest, closest relationships with people I grew up with, were really in celebrating the differences in where they came from. I had a lot of friends who were immigrants, or kids of immigrants. I'm a child of immigrants myself. And so, sort of celebrating that perspective, and all the different, like, diversity of people was really important to me.

SARIKA MEHTA: Well, thank you for sharing that. My last question, you know, you have such a well-timed visit here to Portland.

JONATHAN SUN: Oh yeah.

SARIKA MEHTA: We are T minus two days to the total solar eclipse, that is, you know, has been talked about for such a, you know, I think at least a year in media right now, and, so you have this well-timed visit. How would Jonny Sun and friends, and non-human creatures of the earth, feel about this upcoming odd astronomical anomaly that happens.

JONATHAN SUN: Yeah. Right, I mean, so much of the book is -- is based around, like, my idea of how to deal with, like, with unexpected events, which is to embrace and to see it with new eyes, and to accept it, so I think, like, I think all the characters in the book would see the solar eclipse and be confused, and a little bit alarmed, but really just approach it with curiosity and approach it with sort of like an open-heartedness and an open mind, to just to understand what that's all about and understand what their feelings towards it are.

I think so much of what I wanted to do with the book was just talk about how life comes at you in many unexpected ways, and some good, some bad, but it's really important to kind of like take all that in stride and to take stock of your own personal emotions towards it, and sort of find that acceptance within yourself.

SARIKA MEHTA: Jonathan Sun, thank you so much for taking some time on earth to chat with me, an actual human person.

JONATHAN SUN: Thank you for having me, this was a pleasure.

SARIKA MEHTA: That was my guest Jonathan Sun, the author and illustrator behind the graphic novel "Everyone's a Aliebn When Ur a Aliebn Too." To learn more, check out the Twitter handle @JonnySun.

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