Tammy Kremer ([00:08](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/PUZtW49zPZ7IW-dQr840Aigma9ba8UzfxwfDsS_WtCbb86VY2GzYViwm5_MzvrXE00eBX3Sc_osCd13ONNwPAUvMLK4?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=8.7899999)):

Welcome to Coming Together for Sexual Health. I'm Tammy Kremer and I'm thrilled to talk with you about the world we are creating by coming together for sexual health. And yes, the pun is intended. My background in thinking holistically about health as a facilitator and a doula helps me talk with our guests about celebrating pleasure, combating stigma, and making sexual healthcare both more accessible and more inclusive of the communities we serve.

([00:33](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/XsOYTCianlKqBHiP2rInIF02ChDvUJLCPwfMvUAA0dnL0XMSpwnTqtQe8iqOxb_bTq0eUBW47E0qgZYBjz-sY8GurKE?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=33.84)):

We're powered by nationally recognized experts in sexual health at the University of California, San Francisco, and the California Prevention Training Center. All views expressed are those of the person speaking and not of the CAPTC or their employer. Subscribe to get our latest episodes, share with your friends, and leave us a five-star review to help more people find us. Thank you for coming together for sexual health.

([00:58](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/RF_erC2iSEPy8Ai0gn4Jvghki71bskWRFTxlo8cnAlvyVrxJYYjX1uZiSOqq4Rz3B_l_khsCP610W-wq8nNU3QEkyiY?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=58.83)):

Welcome to Coming Together for Sexual Health, Rachel Gross. I'm so excited to have you here. I just loved reading your book this summer, Vagina Obscura: An Anatomical Journey. I was literally gushing about it, which felt very appropriate to the book, to many of my friends, who got to hear all about the clitoris and the vagina and duck vaginas and Miriam Minkin and just the ways that the penis and other body parts have been studied so much more than female anatomy.

([01:27](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/xids3K2Pueym8nbzZb8S0AgO9oU3MOjYI97bHXZ0CUFwJEX0WbNb0zLO1rgowmCWahTs7ntLMILguqJ0vJMDEoZWP0M?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=87.51)):

So I'm just really excited to speak with you. Rachel is a science reporter. She writes a lot for the New York Times and for The Atlantic. And she's also, of course, the author of the book, Vagina Obscura, which is the topic of this little episode here today. So welcome, Rachel.

Rachel Gross ([01:40](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/bWwt4oNOhKGPD63XI6D7OyeFdAhyJVVYH9Sl4gYvIqIlYIf23QFfHrxHh7cadCV7it2unBFOQq4EcnN3En955NPBeXk?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=100.74)):

Thank you so much, Tammy. We love to keep things moist and lubricated, so I'm loving that. And also your ability to recall specific details from the book warms my heart. Thank you so much for having me. And this is one of my favorite topics, so really glad to be on a podcast literally called Coming Together.

Tammy Kremer ([01:59](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/2t9m7L8ndjAmQjk5X-wwr2k6Kh-OTUFJSIpG2_I4ERq-vcBWsAQNvA_D0BkLs-w0aTgXybRzqwHOzDJ5TJ8P0rjTaKc?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=119.79)):

It's always a good beginning of a conversation to be gushing together or moistening. I'd love to hear what got you into writing Vagina Obscura. What got you into this work to begin with?

Rachel Gross ([02:12](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/s9_8GeSzr_Hyp_KlD0m623T_dR3FmgLDju3DkQQj4VOg_-uTA_9jGYX9JWXEcSwiQ89dfkPnCnXweLtLJGPbLKuTHzU?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=132.03)):

Great question. I've been a science reporter for more than 10 years. My mom's a doctor. My dad's a physicist. My stepmom's a molecular biologist. So, science kind of runs my blood. And I just was always kind of comfortable talking about female anatomy stuff and realized late in life that not everyone was. I was an editor at Smithsonian Magazine when this book was conceived, I suppose, and I was commissioning a lot of these essays about women who changed science. And basically it was women who were asking questions that had never been asked and fighting these systemic barriers to their education.

([02:56](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/Wr5x0RwSpXpJLxMCfIoY3bOEfnwz0xqZQnKWI9jlWieNOmikpdk2tier4RILdPdjMrNSG1WzR9mIWRTd_OQBR7AiyIk?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=176.46)):

At the same time, I was publishing a lot of work on just basic reproductive biology. So, a rubber vagina was created to help med school students do better pelvic exams and study the reproductive tract. And I started to see this parallel between whose voices were not being heard in the history of science, and why are we only asking these very basic questions about reproduction sexuality now? It seemed to me that these two things were intertwined, the marginalization of female voices and LGBT voices and the marginalization of sexuality as a science. So, that's my academic answer.

([03:37](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/VL_ptfGRnwddVP3alPSz7ONQy7ITn39fC-n4111L6-tFXuCKsCzj-tNFDN9GLcLbbJOADdsOR0xt4QaK2sTBJlTWLWU?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=217.95)):

My more personal answer is that during the same time when I was an editor, I also got a bacterial infection in my vagina that was very annoying and very itchy, and I later found out was called a BV or bacterial vaginosis, and it affects one-third of people with vaginas. I'd never heard of this. I thought that I was pretty knowledgeable about vaginas and the like. And at some point my OB-GYN was like, "Okay, we've tried anti-fungals and antibiotics. Nothing has worked. You can try this medication. I'm going to tell you before you look it up, it is literally rat poison. It's called boric acid and it's used to kill pests, and also put in people's vaginas since the 1800s."

Tammy Kremer ([04:24](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/_4lZW-9LmbLQlzBpVIfg-E-2r3fQsmS53FxXaoUSNMQLvnORZp2MTBQNvpYA3TicvPpYnTxEIjWTYIdqcsnn-bOoFog?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=264)):

Wow.

Rachel Gross ([04:24](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/SNDzGCILFxw7XKtwDkzgx9efDJ75FPCUzDQOvThBLHyuN-qCouI8kM-HQFKPCbs59YPcAU0bG6BDys4tFezb8boW4-Q?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=264.57)):

So, that was pretty shocking. And I did put that in my vagina for about a week every night. This is a long story, but you can read the book if you want. Essentially I woke up in the middle of the night one night and realized I had forgotten to take my medication, went to the bathroom, opened this canister of what are essentially pill capsules that you're supposed to insert into your vagina, but that also look just like antibiotics. And without thinking very hard, I just swallowed one, and realized later what I'd swallowed, which led to a trip to the emergency room.

([05:01](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/Xnt6ta1Rne6zlyETuBW_YreHffbzNS1BQU87hv6kBGLzliTBdDdK1PkZOwAo-NJu8syFEWsQPL1fc09whAE8WYVMDWk?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=301.5899999)):

And I don't know, it basically made me confront the fact that I knew very little about my own anatomy and the medication that I was taking just because I'd been recommended it by a doctor. I had a lot of trust in the medical system and a lot of ignorance, I guess, about my anatomy and biology and not really my own failing, but a more systemic lack of knowledge that I decided to explore.

Tammy Kremer ([05:28](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/-htCMOa9ODZeZltqfbYuEYdMIQkClk8A7rm4PKyNBwD6rwgo6JvubuLxq47xBGNzHW-LYEJKRpy401foIa6QeHY1GYE?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=328.74)):

Wow. Did you feel like your exploration of that in the book... I guess, where does that bring you now? What did you learn from that on a personal level?

Rachel Gross ([05:36](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/BMtAwyUVu9eI-wPEbwD2PWpPTOmSX6U_VjxV8-hRWYfkruJB7SLLGLKsX6rdAlHx0eZia0X7b_ZQnX8DPE7Ba9TN0RI?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=336.81)):

I do feel like I have a much better handle of what was going on then and now. The more I looked into that particular issue, the more I realized that there's this teeming community of bacteria and other microbial inhabitants that hang out and build a world in your vagina. I was actually kind of awed by that concept instead of grossed out. There's billions of microbes that are working together to make the conditions in your body suitable for living and thriving, and it's usually going well, which is wild.

([06:17](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/qi19DhhKsAUzq73dgekfdoRlZfSy0AkdQL62lsHYkEZ6UKq6ixiW3Ra9dvAiSbw2OgWPL4_CeXhUMcIWg4AoaVrNfaI?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=377.52)):

And this one time that the balance was disrupted and I felt it so intensely made it clear to me how much work my body is doing at a microscopic level constantly to keep me able to do what I love. And that applies to a lot of the other body parts that I was investigating. So, I definitely have a lot more precision and respect for the parts of my body that I think we don't sing about enough. So, the uterus, the ovaries, the fallopian tubes, the vulva, the vagina, and most importantly the clitoris.

([06:50](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/X0mO8ML7DB9EtzrHC9kRntxAwhilS83rhh_z_mX6JsBUaqvMJvKhDf-nd1McBDiQHLQF37zthi71a0DYNt9iVRJTuxo?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=410.46)):

So, I have a lot more pride I think, and I also just connected with so many people with these body parts who have either had these problems that they haven't gotten a good explanation for or they've been dismissed about, they've realized these huge knowledge gaps exist, or were just mind blown to learn more about how their body works and wondering why that didn't happen earlier.

Tammy Kremer ([07:14](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/QoLoAGN-ZhDcrUy4w4ja9K-iDXHdJ8YIhWu-cLPsDnIVvoHXEJjoOS-JlgVQHq4U9NzqxZ6Pak1AXj6MwtqsWkX0RdQ?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=434.91)):

That was something I really enjoyed in reading the book, was getting to hear from so many people, both researchers, providers, doctors, and also just individuals who were dealing or learning about their own bodies. The vaginal microbiome really is mind-blowing. And I loved how you also brought in looking at inequities and about differences of how we understand health across different populations. I think something about the average pH balance of people's vaginas is found to be different across different racial groups. Is that right?

Rachel Gross ([07:45](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/kBMtXsPiBs8KjdaCEZYxQnnsR9jAjGoP6pD3cmya0yXLPPlu-A-oV54ARudHA0f6WCkfef1vmHB5V5txdbX5VojJ0LQ?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=465.78)):

Yeah, pretty much. And yeah, I'm glad you brought this up actually. This seems very relevant to your work and sexual health. So, what it was was that we've only pretty recently been looking at the composition of the vaginal microbiome, like who's doing what down there, and that composition varies across racial groups. Researchers have known this for a while. There's always been this sort of unstated or sometimes stated assumption that it's something biological.

([08:14](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/TKQGnRoAUbtDH9Cli2gFcGbYSaFEq77RK9bg3Ft8ZfH_5_1uN1sLCBwTAOanE4QfEnfxPM6H6__-3256cCdHy6Mu9AI?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=494.49)):

Like, "Okay, Black women, Asian women, their vaginas look like this." And only more recently has it been acknowledged that wait, there's socioeconomic factors at play. There's the compounding effects of systemic racism, and there's diet and access to healthcare, and all of those things do shape your vaginal microbiome. It's a microcosm of other parts of your overall health, and assuming that it's something unchangeable and biological is both simplistic and a common mistake that is made in the history of gynecology actually.

([08:51](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/Gb8Gi_g0grloAH9zPHnNdbFok5zLyy3LtCca2buHBux_5KtfQenLpbydpMjTMXzCkaML-bbEHSsgSfDNiVgdKAVnrpQ?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=531.39)):

It was kind of amazing to me that it was a women's health nurse practitioner who works with underserved communities in Georgia who pointed this out, that there was a lot of misinterpretation going on in all of this published research and that it's not that the finding was incorrect, it's that the causes needed to be looked at much more closely, and that would show you what you can change and what can improve with overall health and access to healthcare rather than like, "Oh, this is just the way it is, and if you're more vulnerable to disease and other causes of mortality, then that's just... You're out of luck."

Tammy Kremer ([09:31](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/-FomYfCyeo-HzaKd4nhZOVp7IxZTG6sTQFf7EMRh-WLFD56-JKhZVIL0WGcvGVHwbfC4GqWnM6W1WzheTwH5wUQCCYA?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=571.08)):

Yeah. The way that you explained that in terms of that shifting framework makes me think about the title of the book, Vagina Obscura, and how that theme comes through across the different body parts that you discuss like the vagina, looking at what research we have or don't have, and how there was so much more research done on other kinds of anatomy. So yeah, curious to hear about that name and if that is a theme that resonates across these areas for you.

Rachel Gross ([09:55](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/FdmkW9qac3cpLBSIfXqfnMkoMGYai2yRb_0k6DoJVWskdGCaDcsqHL2thykH0FfrybAYf_fjeiCtj4RAp1qpqlU3EhI?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=595.8)):

Oh, that's one of my favorite topics. Because the name was kind of difficult to come up with. I think initially it was called something like Lady Anatomy just as a working title, and that was actually a reference to this female anatomist called The Lady Anatomist in Italy, who ended up studying, in great detail, penises and scrotums and the eyeball. But it was kind of this tongue in cheek thing of like, "Oh, these are scientists with fascinating questions, but we're going to call them lady scientists because they're just doing this niche work for half the population."

([10:27](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/3eIZbAAk3N0Kr9xuBDjVTPlzzWQ_-CyDvoBeXl4pvcKGmM3T1T_zWtZ5nmhaAi90QqD2AuMGst-xbjzlkemUsTefJjo?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=627.42)):

Eventually I started thinking about the camera obscura and how it was this important development in the evolution of the camera, and it basically projects an image through a pinhole from the outside in. But in order to project that image, it has to turn it upside down, make it blurry, or make it really small and difficult to see. So, it's doing this warping and distorting thing even as it's giving you real information, just like those findings about different vaginal microbiomes are real, but they're misleading.

([10:58](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/Aa2UnulPGBkCXfjhea5AB13LSTR-M6R5uV5CHkcxmHBuEcgtzYmQZ-6H7RMiMRMizk2d8LKsAokTtjyZfpUwpu3xAbo?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=658.17)):

So, basically all these body parts, our understanding of them has come through a warped lens, the lens of a very white western male science, and they've been considered to be obscure and mysterious when really, I argue, that's not the case. You just need to take a different lens and ask some different questions, and that's what all the people in this book are doing.

Tammy Kremer ([11:17](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/A84uUk_grnPSv3wKY5Cb6o36kz27BD_ksufnmh5BB55eIVceaujbSbvyJarhAiHSjATuqkC8rtucAPPIyBOQS_thChE?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=677.85)):

Yeah, I was just thinking about how many times as I was reading, I was marking something and I was like, "How did I not know this? This seems so basic." Another section that I think of is the endometriosis description. I'm just like, "One in 10 people who have female anatomy experience this." And my little bits of knowledge are... I was just like, "Wow. The information I have is so insufficient relative to the people around me who I know are impacted."

([11:45](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/8burJMHN4QVnrj0hWx4xNTmLY9JIH33dndHTxLufxWPDpNuQHl-j8wjRwGUoNE-4SiOghjW3ZS0_uHxIn0QHUkUrzLI?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=705.03)):

And just getting to begin to learn more, I noticed that since reading my ears perk up a little bit where I'm like, "Oh, that's an area that I need to be paying more attention to," or, "What does it look like for me to be a supportive friend or an ally to someone who's going through that?" And understanding, it is so absurd that the kind of medicine, the kind of options we have available for folks with endometriosis are so limited, and if I remember correctly, are basically the same methods that have been utilized for the last 30 or 40 years. Is that right?

Rachel Gross ([12:14](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/hfw1qDplcxt4r9Xyko27MRgrKTVaNmLdnW1djhDNQwiSksC36w-HjoNSP1oQwe54mwsJWjb1xYEtjjsdLURMqwi7hGA?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=734.07)):

Yeah, that's exactly how I think of it. Basically, we're using the same strategy of quieting the reproductive system and turning the volume down on hormones. And even new medications like ORILISSA, they're all doing the exact same thing without questioning how this disease works. And like you said, a huge amount of people with uteruses. Yeah, and I'm really glad you had that takeaway.

([12:42](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/bpoZmDHv4LPqFdPxcYa3ZkbU9T_8TOt4CP96inLS9e0kNB8Y6XRoglmwVA5drUrG0UtoGSeaHgRNyyaY1h47yIcIheQ?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=762.63)):

I think that's really cool that it made you more alert and observant to what's already going on. My mind was also blown. So, again, I feel like this is really a more systemic reaction than any individual lack. There's a reason we know so little about, for instance, endometriosis. Because it's been marginalized and considered a female disease, and in fact white woman's career disease in that case, and associated with things like hysteria.

([13:15](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/lrddwJAfXYibwdfQSbMQi9Pt9ZnCdSvEyxsp3e-BdAbIswhA3bXcMEfU_vXeK1csoGcqWMiljwV-kZu_EzHTr_x36BM?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=795)):

As a result, this really interesting and impactful inflammatory chronic illness is super understudied and it deprives us of understanding other diseases and other related conditions. For instance, adenomyosis, which is the similar kind of uterine lining type tissue growing inside the uterine wall. Also, really common, a really common cause of hysterectomies.

Tammy Kremer ([13:42](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/yeO1kOQh1oWZZoxIO9PIoCbAZoQo8PgEqMkA5bgH8isFQcgl8IpJiGXtOOxuCE031rrAcq39YTpjLRU62nlV3_0WIUY?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=822.84)):

Wow. Well, to close out this discussion of the book, I just want to let our listeners know that the next episode is going to focus all on the clit. So, we haven't really gotten into that in this discussion, but there's a lot to look forward to. Rachel, is there any favorite thing you'd like to share with our listeners or highlights of the book to close on?

Rachel Gross ([14:02](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/gbBeLH-xve5QyACu3DwIjAfky26hyCbuvtm4b2InvL29ncb5XA51-pwe0OmkBVTs7mPpn6BKtH-9VnKdhdc4os7xBBk?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=842.19)):

One thing I'm thinking of because of your question about vaginal microbiome research is just there is an overall shift in the field towards looking at these organs and these conditions as less rooted in biology and this unchangeable destiny and being much more fluid and flexible. So, the topic of regeneration, regrowth, and a shift in balance comes up when we're talking about all the parts of the reproductive and sexual system.

([14:36](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/WYUS7PhvQSxE4FJcOROQpR_WvJt8SVNB-cNZ5XpmqJ_8qmSEuZcnr3d8CQDYfXVdoe45xXGzoP5uTEF0uCJxAZvn714?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=876.15)):

Thinking of them as organs that can change and adapt to their environment and to what's going on, I think, is much more useful than thinking of like, "These are things that make you a woman and that is rooted in your biology, and anatomy is destiny, essentially." So, that's one thought. There are an incredible number of cool facts that I could talk about for a long time if you want me to.

Tammy Kremer ([15:02](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/Z7axk1MAT-f1lL1vk2YHgHxfEqjUfushwiH5cT2vSBaJMN11f8Gs0aHsgpXTau53Axq62n_zSqSGDBHq4gv-Xp_SzY8?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=902.31)):

That's what I experienced in reading your book. Every page was like, wow, so many amazing details. I liked ending on that note too, just in terms of the way that looking at anatomy as understanding that our anatomy grows from a similar same route, whether no matter how we are later assigned gender or sex-wise at birth.

([15:21](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/kLlwBefcLhpsBH3QuAMkz01fgeyZlD78zxL94en-b7eOctRmDBDMysP_K1hD7pSslFPfk6AaXhqNbAmSswSHoCSB_04?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=921.21)):

Thank you so much, Rachel for writing this book, for sharing this book. It's definitely enriched my understanding of my own body and also my thinking about how I function in this field, and trying to make sure that I do my part to counteract the tendencies and leanings that are so difficult to move out of in a field with so much history of putting emphasis on other aspects of bodies. So, thank you.

Rachel Gross ([15:50](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/fUcQYVjpg52y0xgdUS9X4tf3xkoARM3WgyNlUpV83VFr6M3AEHnKWowaxWd_k2Ry2eab1zxZS0CdT1GZxmNov8rO-9U?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=950.01)):

Thank you so much, Tammy. It's connecting with people like you that make writing the book worth it, and I love being able to rethink our respective fields together. So, thank you for having me.

Tammy Kremer ([16:00](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/re2v9hT5DurcEPSUqSwvy4oeTpU-xGKRGKXrWxsjgma_J_OLR5cSyfy7-PocexBNfwctFLSwxjeWccUSpLIfdtUIa-w?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=960.69)):

Absolutely. Thanks for listening, and please follow and rate us wherever you get your podcasts to help more people find us. And hey, how about sharing this with a friend or a colleague you'd like to talk with about sexual health? Check out the show notes for the resources mentioned in this episode and the transcript of the show. Connect with us on Instagram at Coming Together Pod, on X at CaliforniaPTC, and at Comingtogetherpod.com.

([16:24](https://www.rev.com/transcript-editor/shared/kx9WK1LRz139aIuXfbqRk0x_U3YJvxbf8IKWbhOmuDr81ToP4tRMv62Cte-tftGz08eCrERMz7cGIXDONoxF6K1wW5Y?loadFrom=DocumentDeeplink&ts=984.6)):

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