

# Chatting with Tamsin Phillipa Paige

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Tamsin Phillipa Paige, Spyridoula Katsoni

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**Welcome to the latest interview of the Völkerrechtsblog's symposium 'The Person behind the Academic'! With us we have Dr. Tamsin Phillipa Paige, and through the following questions, we will try to get a glimpse of her interests, sources of inspiration and habits.**

**Welcome Dr. Paige and thank you very much for accepting our invitation!**

**May I first ask, what it was that brought you to academia and what made you stay?**

I was a poor student (both from a financial and a grades perspective) in law school (I didn't start law school till I was in my mid 20s and I was trying to leave a career as a chef), because like most working-class students I lacked the time to dedicate to study. I was working full time, first as a pastry chef and then as a paralegal and court registry officer, while also studying full time, so my grades were mostly bare passes. I went through a pretty nasty divorce towards the end of law school and had a bit of breakdown and realised that I hated the practice of law.

I was in Honni van Rijswijk's Law and Literature elective and after coming back to study after time off to recover my mental health and there was a class discussion about sexual assault that set off all my PTSD buttons and had me leave the class hyperventilating and crying. Honni, because they is a saint, didn't take their break between classes so they could check on me and to distract me they asked me what I planned to do after I graduated. This caused me to cry and cry even more. Between sobs I said that I hated legal practice and can't go do that and that I love doing research but my grades were too poor for me to get into a research degree. I also had too much student debt to pursue a coursework LLM as a pathway to a research degree (it is worth noting that in Australia research degrees have no fees for citizens and permanent residents; not sure about international students). They said that I was definitely well suited for research, and they spent the entire last year of law school meeting with me every week to mentor me and help me get into a research masters. Eventually, Rob McLaughlin saw past my poor grades and convinced the Australian National University to waive the academic admission requirements and that got me started in academia.

I'm here because Honni and Rob saw me as a person of value and supported me. I stay here because I love the research and the high levels of autonomy I get day to day, but also to be Honni and Rob to students (like I was), who through no fault of their own struggle to their foot in the door because of their lack of social privilege.

**If you were not an academic, what would you be?**

If it was my choice of profession, then a DJ or Blacksmith. Although in all reality I'd probably have ended up in corporate litigation or M&As and behaving like Lilah Morgan (from the TV show Angel) and hating myself.

**Which are three texts that you would wish all academics working on international law would read?**

*Petulant and Contrary* by Tamsin Phillipa Paige. Okay, now that we have that joke out of the way I'd say:

1. *Norms, Discipline, and the Law* by Francois Ewald
2. *Feminist Dialogues on International Law* by Gina Heathcote
3. *On Tyranny and the Global Legal Order* by Aoife O'Donoghue

**Would you say that your upbringing has had an impact on your research interests?**

Most definitely. I grew up queer in a conservative, homophobic, religious household so as a child I dreamed of becoming a pirate and sailing off to a life of freedom. As it happens my first topic of research was piracy and the role of law in addressing it (spoiler alert, law is not the solution). My work in queer theory and on queer lives is also a reflection of the hatred I grew up surrounded by and for too long having internalised about myself.

**What is your favourite place to read and write? What is always near you when you read and write?**

If I'm reading for pleasure then I like to read in bed. If it is for academic or other work purposes then it is in my office, same goes with writing. This is by necessity rather than preference. I have to write via voice dictation software due to a spinal disability so I need to have my setup in a quiet space where ambient noise doesn't foul the acoustics and where I can dictate my notes if reading, or what I'm writing if in a writing phase. As for what is always near me while I read and write – a good pot of tea or a nice coffee, depending on the time of day. Also, my Jay and Silent Bob Funko Pops because they are my writing prophets (or should that be profits?), and my Maleficent one because she is my writing mistress.

**What is an energy and inspiration booster, at times when you have none?**

My puppy, Admiral Tali'Zorah vas Normandy – I mean look at that face! Also walking, music, cooking, and playing golf.



**Admiral does look like a puppy that brings energy!**

**Have you ever drawn influence from any form of art in your work? Is there anything artistic about teaching or writing academic texts?**

I think that research work is inherently a creative pursuit, not just the writing that goes into the book or article, but also the problem solving etc. that goes into how you address a research problem/question. As a law and literature scholar in addition to my international law work, I have used a lot of Film, TV, and Literature as a cultural entry point to explore and discuss legal issues.

**Which of your publications is your favourite one? And which of them is your least favourite?**

My forthcoming paper with *Polemos* on Black Sails and the Tyranny of the Law (entitled 'The Whore that Lost Everything') is definitely my favourite one. I wrote it in a three-day fury when Gina Heathcote asked me to submit something for a special issue of *Feminist Review* in 2020 but it got rejected for being too much about law. It got picked up by *Polemos* after a saga which involved the editor losing the paper and thus it not getting sent for review for ages, among other things, but it ended up getting accepted with minor revisions. I use quotes from the show for all my headings so I'm very pleased that I got to get super swears in an academic piece because fuck upper middle-class performative respectability.

The piece I hate the most was one I wrote at the end of my MPhil when I was just trying to get publications to make myself more attractive in the academic job market and I wrote a piece using my Somali piracy fieldwork on the symbolic importance of criminal law and prisons in society for the rule of law. That piece doesn't reflect my values now that I have had time and space to reflect on my beliefs regarding how the law exists to punish the poor for being poor and maintain social hierarchy.

**If you could, which advice would you give to yourself at the early stages of your career?**

Have a Plan B, a Plan C, and maybe a Plan M (shout out to those who get that pop culture reference). I put everything into getting a job in academia and I had no family or spouse to support me if it didn't work out – I only had a Plan A and in hindsight that was a bad approach (no matter what Adama says you never actually have to roll the hard six). I was lucky that it did work out but the toll it took on my mental health trying to get that foot in the door post PhD with no clear other options in my mind was horrifying.

**If you could, which unspoken rule of academia would you instantly erase?**

That ignoring deadlines and emails is acceptable. I'm totally on board with the fact that deadlines will frequently need to be moved or that questions will take time to answer, but you still need to communicate that to the person.

**Have you experienced or witnessed discrimination in academic circles? How have you reacted to these instances?**

Yeah, I really have. When I first started my PhD a senior academic pulled me aside in the halls of that law school and told me "If I had known what you looked like I would have made sure you hadn't gotten a place in this law school." That same

academic also had a role in my PhD examination process and violated the university policy on examinations in order to make my life harder – in true lawyer fashion I considered suing the university, but it would have taken longer than jumping through the hoops they made me jump through. There have been other incidents that I've experience both related to being queer, being a woman, and being disabled but that was the most stark. I've had to deal with it as it related to others in relation to disability discrimination and queerphobia from staff in relation to students. (So many academics believe that students aren't "sufficiently disabled" to warrant accommodations, or that by giving accommodations we aren't preparing the students for the real world – all of which is just ableism, it also ignores the fact that lawyers going into court asking for 6 month continuances because they hadn't bothered to prepare is so common). In all of those incidents I've had to be the calm and reasonable person pointing out why that behaviour is not okay and holding firm to my position, because I know that if I'm not the calmest and most reasonable person in the room my position of "hey maybe don't permit disability discrimination or queerphobia" will be ignored as too emotional to have credibility.

**Would you like to share with us a 'sacrifice' that you have made for your work? Do you regret it?**

I spent almost a decade having no roots anywhere because I kept having to bounce to a new city in a different part of the country or world to do the next thing in my journey to get where I am. This was moving cities for grad school (both the MPhil and then the PhD), moving multiple times for extended fieldwork, moving again for my post-doc, then moving again for my current job. I'd always been good at keeping my own company but having to leave my friends every 12 to 18 months for years was just awful every time it happened. Was it worth it? I like to think yes – I have a job that I mostly enjoy (85% of any job is tedious no matter how much you enjoy the rest of it), a puppy and partner who I love, and good friends – but I can't go and Sliding Doors my life to find out if it would have been better if I didn't, so I'll never really know.

**Ideally, whom would you want to find waiting for a meeting with you outside your office next Monday?**

Seanán McGuire with her laptop, a bag of books, and a box of dice telling me that she is drafting me into a D&D game.

**What are you working on currently? What may we anticipate in the near future?**

I'm working on a few things. I'm trying to finish up my Law and Literature book that uses contemporary popular sci-fi and urban fantasy to explore social perceptions of law and justice. I'm super late on this because of disability flare ups so I really need to get that done. I'm waiting on proofs for a chapter on women who commit atrocities and why holding them responsible for that is a feminist act that I wrote with Stacey Henderson and Joanne Stagg for the Oxford Handbook on Women and International Law. I'm also in the process of editing 2 books with Claerwen O'Hara on Queer Encounters with International Law – we are just getting the reviews trickle in for the

chapters so we need to get feedback to authors so they can work up their chapters some more. On the backburner for when I get the Law and Literature monograph squared away I have a co-authored book with Douglas Guilfoyle on Maritime Piracy to write (we joke that we have gotten the band back together for a greatest hits tour with this book). I also have a paper on Battlestar Galactica and the role of law in society under existential threat of immediate extinction with Dominique Dalla-Pozza in a write up phase. Finally, I'm in the planning stages of my next book which will be looking at law as a genre of storytelling with its own tropes and narrative devices, and then how different forms of legal writing are subgenres of storytelling each with their own tropes and narrative devices. The goal of that book is to be a treatise on methodology in legal research and how all of these different approaches to legal research are linked by the common element that law, at its heart, is a discipline of stories.

**All of these seem very interesting and I can't wait to get my hands on them!**

**Thank you very much, Dr. Paige, for participating in our symposium and for having taken the time to respond to our questions!**

